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NEBULA

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SCIENCE FICTION

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RUSSELL ★ M'INTOSH ★ TUBB ★ RAYER

NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 2

Editor: PETER HAMILTON

No. 2

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Look here...

As this is my Christmas edition, I've done my best to give you something really good in the way of reading entertainment. In fact, I was so liberal when I selected the stories for this issue, that one or two of the popular readers' departments were unavoidably crowded out in favour of printing a really fine line-up of tales.

Leading the way is well-known J. T. M'INTOSH, with a novellette which I think should prove very controversial: some readers may feel that it errs on the "sexy" side, while others, like me, may think that it incorporates such an interesting central idea that it was well worth including. Why don't you drop a line to me with *your* opinion? Following this there is a little gem by E. C. TUBB. This is written in the "Dark Solution" tradition and will be of special interest to the thousands of lovers of that sort.

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL (perhaps Britain's *most* popular science-fiction author) makes his second appearance in NEBULA (as well as his second appearance in any current British magazine!) with an outstanding new science-fiction story which I am sure will be among the most popular I have ever printed. An American author, L. MAJOR REYNOLDS then gives us an extremely suspenseful short story which should make you rather worried the next time you feel suddenly limp and tired.

As you know, I have been saying quite a lot recently about how I am introducing new science-fiction writers and artists to the British public; well, here is the first in a series of short stories by authors who have never had anything in print before and it is par-

ticularly fitting that the contributor this time should be TONY C. THORNE, one of the organisers of the particularly successful Medway science-fiction convention from which I recently returned.

And last, but by no means least, is our old friend F. G. RAYER, whom I welcome back with the space-opera type tale so many of you have been requesting recently. I'll particularly look forward to your comments on this issue.

During the past few months you may have noticed the great influx of "new" science-fiction magazines which have been inundating the bookstalls. What you may not have noticed is the fact that almost all these "new" magazines are merely reprints of American publications (many of which are feeling the financial draught in their own country).

These magazines are reprinted (presumably merely because they *are* American) by large distributing firms in this country, who handle everything from sex books to song sheets and have no personal interest in science fiction at all, but who *are* able to keep a magazine on sale for a considerable number of issues without any great backing from the public.

This, as I'm sure you will agree, can become dangerous for completely British edited magazines like *Nebula*, *Authentic* and the new *Vargo Statten* magazine, the editors of which all take varying degrees of interest in what the British public likes and do their best to print it according to their interpretation of that liking. An American editor is bound to

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The Happier Eden

The first space-flight was a publicity stunt from start to finish, but it's discovery was to change all Earth.

Illustrated by Jack Wilson.

EVERYTHING went very nicely until, about halfway to Mars, Captain Rosetti found the *Astra* was five million miles off her course. This, perhaps, was a small matter and should have been treated as such; while Mars was the expected goal, Rosetti had been told not to worry if he reached Venus instead. On the first inter-planetary flight the details didn't matter.

But as it happened, none of the things which might have played hell with the first calculations for the Earth-Mars flight had done so. The error was entirely due to a simple, demonstrable mistake on the part of the Seventh Officer, Joan Meddows (Australia), and Rosetti could only handle his polyglot, temperamental crew for so long without hitting the roof and swearing at everyone and everything in sight.

It just happened to be Joan Meddows who was sworn at first.

Subsequently she spent six hours locked in her cabin, and finally came out with set face and the correction, represented by ten lines of indigestible and obviously meaningless formulae, and two lines on space maps. She handed these silently to Rosetti. He scanned them as she stood rigidly to attention.

"This seems to be all right," he said at last.

"I've only done it five times," said the Seventh Officer in an unsteady voice. "Better check it very carefully and find all the mistakes."

Present were First Officer Naomi Thomson (England), Second Officer Bill Tilden (South Africa) and Eighth Officer Yo Ten Hok (China) in addition to Rosetti and Joan. Rosetti was Captain Harry Rosetti (America), whose chief qualification for the job was that he spoke no less than seven languages and could get by in three more.

"Okay," said Naomi pacifically. "Let's be friends again, huh?"

"Sorry, Joan," Rosetti grinned, and held out his hand. Seventh Officer Meddows put her hand forward to take it, burst into tears, and ran from the room.

"I don't think, captain," said Naomi thoughtfully, "that you've done this the right way."

"I suppose he should have said," Bill Tilden remarked, "never mind, it's only five million miles?"

Naomi looked at them and recognised the difference of opinion for what it was. Men and women may be equal to the same thing, but they can never be equal to each other. Rosetti and Tilden and Yo Ten Hok all clearly thought, though they didn't say: Might have known better than to trust a woman to do a man's job.

She was going on regardless of the odds, but Third Officer Micheline Thomas (France) arrived opportunely, like a small hurricane. She whirled into the control room and burst out in French, since she didn't care who understood her as long as Rosetti did:

"What is it that you have been doing to the little Joan? It is barbarous! She weeps, her, and me, I do not blame her! All over five million miles of nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing!"

"What's this rah, rah, rah business?" demanded Bill, puzzled.

"Rien," Rosetti corrected. "Hold it Micheline. And you, too, Naomi. So I was wrong. Six reasonable human beings on this crazy ship, and I have to pick on one of them. Get her back, Naomi. Tell her I'm sorry. Tell her anything you like."

Naomi was a nice girl, but even she couldn't help driving home an advantage she knew she had. "All very well to say that now," she observed. "You say you're sorry, but first you let off steam. Joan's sensitive. Swear at me if you like, and I'll swear back. But Joan—"

"Good God in heaven!" Bill exploded. "Joan makes a mistake that might have cost our lives, and then Rosetti has to apologise, and even that's not enough, he's got to go down on his knees because he . . ."

Micheline burst into a torrent of Parisian invective. She had an advantage over Bill in that she understood him perfectly well while he didn't know a word of French.

"Quiet!" Rosetti shouted. He had a louder voice than any of them. That was another reason why he was captain. He forced silence and then relaxed with an effort. "Get Joan, Naomi," he said. "There's something here we have to settle."

Naomi nodded, and left the control room.

Rosetti sat down. "Now quiet all of you," he said, "while I think."

Sometimes superior science is not enough to win wars—even scientific wars. Korania found that out and didn't live to tell the tale. Korania ceased to be a faintly comic real-life Ruritania, useful as an excuse for spy stories and musical comedies, when her scientists showed themselves to be decades ahead of the rest of the world, and ready to prove it. But if the rest of the world had to supply fifty trained men to eliminate one untrained Koranian, the rest of the world could afford it. So a promising challenge for world domination was gradually buried under a mound of black, white and yellow corpses.

Inevitably when the world had returned to its more or less peaceful occupations, the idealists could not find words to express their horror that the magnificent Koranian science had been pulverised by savages—but it was not for want of trying. The World Government, wilting under the verbal attack, at last remembered with relief that the efforts of forty-three espionage corps had at least given them the secrets behind Korania's bases on the moon. They therefore could, and did, organise a vast diversion in an international Space Project, which was developed to the tune of a million brass bands and publicised in every known language and a few of which no one was quite certain.

Australia was selected by ballot as the home country for the scheme. Every other nation was consoled in its natural disappointment by the consideration that the possible annihilation of Australia could be borne in mind with greater composure than its own destruction. When the general call went forth the nations sent all their

second-best men with no thought of self, and opened their coffers even before being asked, but not too wide. Australia's population grew rapidly. All accommodation on ships to the continent was booked solid. Though it was not so widely publicised, the more cautious of the foreign scientists, technicians and steelworkers had also booked all the accommodation on ships leaving shortly before the take-off.

Harry Rosetti, an Italian-French American who had Chinese, Spanish and German connections, was appointed captain of the ship, which was christened, by the combined research and ingenuity of forty-three nations the *Astra*. His First Officer, chosen by a Personnel Board who wished to be fair to everybody was Naomi Thomson, a delicious English girl with teeth and legs and eyes, selected from London University to the complete mystification of other graduates who had better degrees. Jealousy must, however, have been at the root of their disagreement with the choice, for Miss Thomson was chosen after exhaustive tests, which even included a parade in bathing costumes.

Second Officer was Bill Tilden. The cynics had a reason for his choice. They said he was so honest and plain-spoken that those in high places had decided to let him be honest and plain-spoken on Mars, or Venus, or wherever the *Astra* happened to land—if anywhere. But the cynics always had a reason for everything. That was why they were called cynics. Third Officer was Micheline Thomas of Paris, a brunette, petite and vivacious in fortuitous contrast to First Officer Thomson, who was blonde, tall and athletic. The cynics' comment on the Third Officer's choice—in relation to that of the First Officer—was that the Personnel Board did not believe you couldn't have everything.

Every member of the crew was an officer, and for the fourteen officers, including Captain Rosetti, there were fourteen different uniforms—since that was a matter for the individual governments. As the whole affair was a propaganda tour de force pure and simple (though everybody but the cynics would have raised their hands in horror at the suggestion), the uniforms were as decorative as the Heroes and Heroines of Space whom they decorated—and just as useful.

When the preparations were complete the international Space Project staff went on their dutiful way back to countries which apparently needed them, right on schedule. In Australia had remained the crew of the *Astra*, the skeleton launching staff chosen from the optimists and the unimaginative, and the Australians, who

got rather in the way but couldn't conveniently be cleared out of it. On the appointed time to the second, or as a great British statesman put it, to the teeny-weeniest part of a second, the *Astra* left Earth. There was no damage, to everyone's surprise.

In fact, the way the *Astra* left Earth went a long way towards turning the Space Project, at that late date, into a serious effort to conquer space, and perhaps here and there a few of the people who had been intimately connected with it from the beginning wondered uneasily if the *Astra's* crew should not have been selected on a different principle, if more time and thought should not have gone into the design and construction of the ship, and if they should not have been more than vaguely aware all along that there was a distinct possibility that the *Astra* might actually reach Mars.

In cold, hard fact, there was no reason why the *Astra* and her crew should not be the best possible for the project. Equally, there was no reason why they should. Chance had ordained that the first mighty Space Project should be a flag-waving affair organised by an insecure World Government.

And should there be Martians, was Earth ready to meet them? At the suggestion the scientists came into their own again. They said what they had been saying for years about the possibility of life on Mars—but now people listened to them.

Then, having listened, everybody relaxed. There was no life on Mars. Certainly not human life, which would raise so many uncomfortable problems.

Micheline insisted to Rosetti and the others, before Naomi returned, that no mention should be made to Joan of the cause of the dissention.

"She knows she was wrong," Micheline explained in her almost perfect, but attractively Parisian English. "It is not necessary to belabour the point."

So when Naomi returned with Joan at her heels, Rosetti merely acknowledged their arrival with a nod and made it a general council meeting.

"According to the methods of selection," he said, "the whole crew might be worthless. But I don't think I'm worthless. I admit the possibility of prejudice, conceit and irrationality, but there it is. I think there could be worse captains for the first spaceship."

"It's a point of view," admitted Naomi judicially. "But before we go any further—what are we talking about, and why?"

"There's no discipline on this ship," said Rosetti. "How

could there be? I was never the captain of anything before. I wasn't even in the army. Naomi, you're nineteen, straight out of university, and I don't expect you ever took an order or gave one."

Naomi admitted it. She grinned.

"It isn't funny," said Rosetti grimly. "As a matter of fact, we're damn lucky that there are six reasonable human beings out of the fourteen."

"A Chinese, a Parisienne, a South African, an Australian, a Londoner and an American," Naomi mused. "We couldn't be prejudiced, could we?"

"You mean, four English speakers out of six? We've left Betty Kerens out of the group."

"Yes," agreed Naomi, "but we have to, don't we? A lot of better things have come out of Canada than Thirteenth Officer Kerens. She's not Canada's fault. But maybe I'm just jealous of her legs."

"You needn't be," said Rosetti. "That's what you were fishing for, isn't it?"

"Not exactly," said Naomi absently, "but I won't throw it back."

Bill exploded in wrath again. "If you've got anything in mind, Rosetti, let's have it, and none of this damn nonsense. You and Naomi can practise your vaudeville act some other time."

"I'm sorry you don't like the way I'm going about this, Bill," Rosetti said mildly. "I was just going to propose a new setup with you in charge."

Bill calmed down a little. "No," he said more quietly. "I'd fly off the handle every five minutes. You've only done it once, Rosetti, and apologised for it, which is more than I could have done. I think we'll stay as we are."

"If you like. But if you elect me, I'll really be in command, not just a propaganda captain, and when I say jump I'll want everyone to jump."

"We'll jump," said Joan. Everyone looked involuntarily at her and she coloured. She was brilliant and nervous—thirty per cent. mathematician, thirty per cent. glamour girl, and the rest inferiority complex.

"There's something other," said Micheline. They turned as she spoke. She had a brain, the little Parisienne, and when she opened her mouth she usually had something to say.

"It was reasonable in our present state of civilisation," she said, "that this crew should be evenly devised—divided—as to sex. Especially as the project started as prapaganda."

"Started!" Bill ejaculated. "Propaganda it was, is, and ever shall be."

"I disagree," said Micheline mildly. "But that is not my point. It was also natural that a man should be placed in command. The women would agree to that as well as the men. But the . . . what is that word . . . the constitution, such as it was, was wrong. Men and women are not ready to work together as absolute equals, I think. Joan, I must speak of it. Captain Rosetti swore at you not only because you were the navigator and made a mistake, but because you were a woman. He swore at you for not being a man. You reacted because you had made a mistake and knew it, and because a man was swearing at you. Oh, why does not somebody else say this and I would not have to strive with your hellish language?"

Even Bill had to laugh, but he was the first to see her point. "Finish it, Mish," he said. "You're doing fine."

"Let the women report to a woman," said Micheline. "Naomi here. She can report to the captain. There will be no more scenes between Rosetti and Joan, or Bill and Betty Kerens. And Naomi and Rosetti must work together for the goodness of us all."

"The idea," Rosetti remarked, "was that no sex distinction should be made."

"That idea," Micheline replied gently, "was very silly. When men and women require no distinction, we shall all be amoebas."

"I think she has something," said Bill. "Maybe nobody cares what I think, but that's it."

And so it was agreed.

Whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, it was inevitable that the fourteen men and women on the *Astra* should split very decidedly into groups. There were the council group and all the others. Inside the council group there were the girls and the men, the technicians and the non-technicians, the cool and the fiery . . . One moment it would be Naomi, Micheline and Joan against Rosetti, Bill and Hok, the next Joan and Hok against all the rest, then Rosetti and Naomi as authority against rank-and-file.

But the council combined, and the other eight never did. And the council was *always* combined as far as the others were concerned.

It was soon clear that the council was not merely necessary. It was vital. When the Tenth Officer had to be told plainly and forcibly that his guitar and bass voice, while intrinsically pleasant, were getting on everyone's nerves, it was up to the council to do it,

for none of the others, in the heat of the moment, would have been able to do it cleanly and decisively, without calling him a loud-mouthed nigger. When the Twelfth Officer, Theodore Messner, developed a psychosis concerning non-existent rats, the council members helped him to hunt them all down, and completely removed the menace. And when the Fifth and Sixth Officers began to make love too publicly, the council had to be firm but not unreasonable.

In addition to all this, there was the problem of getting the *Astra* to Mars and landing there. This was handled chiefly by Rosetti and Joan, with Naomi as the imperturbable go-between.

The delegation system worked very well. If Rosetti wanted to swear at Joan again, a great deal of the motive and satisfaction was removed by the fact that he had to do it to Naomi, who solemnly took it down in questionable shorthand. If Joan wanted to burst into tears and protest that Rosetti was working her too hard and that she could never get through it all, she learned to gulp it down when Naomi (whose degree was not in mathematics) threatened to help her.

"As a matter of fact," Rosetti said once to Naomi, "you're the virtual captain of this ship. You certainly have most of the power."

"Have I?" asked Naomi, interested. "Yes, I suppose I have."

Rosetti rested his eyes on her. "Some lucky fellow is going to have all that and your brains too," he murmured. "Do you know who it is?"

"You mean, am I engaged? No."

"It should be me, of course. The whole world will expect it."

She grinned. "Which world?"

He thought about those words for fully a minute. He wondered seriously for the first time whether there was intelligent life on Mars. It would pose so many problems that he didn't feel fitted to handle. Weakly, he hoped there was none.

"I know I'm beautiful," said Naomi innocently, "because so many people tell me so. But —"

He realised he had left his eyes on her and gone away and forgotten them. "Believe me," he said, "I'd forgotten you were there."

"Well, there's no need to overdo it," Naomi told him coldly.

On the *Astra* they saw the Martian domes long before they touched down. They were very large and flat, each with a bump

in the middle making them almost exactly the shape of symmetrical fried eggs. There were hundreds of them, all in the canals. In some areas they were scattered sparsely, in others they jostled together like eggs that had run together in the pan. They reflected too little light ever to have been seen from Earth. They were visible through the *Astra's* telescopes only because the cities beneath them inferred and outlined them. Then they showed as a chameleon does when its exact location is pinpointed.

It was impossible for a long time to see whether the cities were alive or not. There was no light from them—no organised light, at any rate, merely dim, occasional flashes that might be dead reflection. One thing, however, indicated life. Here and there a dome had been abandoned or destroyed. The contrast between these and the others subtly inferred the difference between death and life.

Then a dome suddenly lit up. Fourteen people saw it almost at once. The interpretations were various. Joan Meddows had an idea that the lights had been switched on by the last man on Mars; Consuela Avanez expressed the opinion that the light represented preparations for annihilating the *Astra*; and Sonia Koselman guilelessly put forward the suggestion that the cities slept by turn, and the illuminated dome was a watchdog.

Rosetti felt once more, now that a decision had to be made, that it would have been better if Bill Tilden had to make it. Rosetti was peaceful and indolent. He could stand up for himself in an emergency, but it would be much better if the emergency didn't last for more than five minutes.

He sighed. "We're obviously intended to land beside that dome," he said, trying to sound as if he were in full command of the situation. "The question is, should we do it?"

"It's a big question," Bill remarked. "If they want to blow us up, we'd be giving them a perfect opportunity."

"They're friendly," Naomi observed briefly.

"Feminine intuition?" asked Rosetti.

"Say the same thing so it isn't an insult and I'll admit it."

"Can you back it up at all?" Rosetti asked. Naomi was no fool.

"I don't see why not. Look at those domes. Science. See how they guard the whole planet. You can't have scientific advance without the discovery of weapons, even if only by mistake. I expect we could have been dust by now if that was what the Martians wanted. We're not really armed. And what do they do? They don't threaten us, they just switch on the lights. What can we do but land?"

"I have an uncomfortable feeling that you're right," said Rosetti.

The *Astra* settled towards the lighted city. Once they had made their intentions clear, the lights came on in the other domes, even the damaged ones.

"Do those chewed-up domes," Rosetti mused, "mean they've been having a war?"

As the *Astra* sank gently, her crew saw that the city underneath the dome was not so much illuminated as spotlight. They saw that the Martians were artists. The buildings were of marble, sandstone, granite and an apparently manufactured material used like brick but much more attractive than brick. There was also a silver stone toned down so as not to dazzle, but still silver. In the buildings there was not one straight line. Some lines were curved to look straight, like the sides of Earth's buildings, but there was no dissonant line to be seen.

"They must be human," Naomi stated definitely.

"More intuition?" asked Rosetti. "No insult."

"They must think like us. Or we just wouldn't understand that architecture. They have to be human. I just can't see intelligent slugs building like that, can you? And notice the light? It's powerful, there's no distortion, colours seem to be right, but it doesn't hurt the eyes. Looks as if it was intended for human eyes."

They began to see moving specks in the city, larger ones that hopped or ran across open spaces, dark clots here and there which might have been crowds watching the sky. Then they saw little more as the nearer buildings cut off their view of the rest of the city. Rosetti set the ship down only a matter of yards from the rim of the dome. The spotlighting in the city went out.

A squat car rolled from the dome towards the ship. To Rosetti it seemed to disprove Naomi's idea that the Martians were human. It was plain, colourless, irregular and very ugly. It ran on vicious caterpillar tracks. Then Rosetti realised that the difference between the car and the buildings was the difference between a luxury sedan and an army tank. However friendly the Martians might be, they would not make an unprotected approach.

They were, however, prepared to enter the ship. There were two airlocks, one in the nose and the other in the stern. Rosetti climbed down to meet the visitors. He made Naomi, Bill Tilden, Joan Meddows and five others remain in the control room.

It was an historic moment as the inner door was closed and they heard faintly the outer door opening. Last-minute thoughts scurried through Rosetti's mind—the possibility that the Martians

or the Earthmen would have a disease, in check in themselves, but fatal to the others; the idea that the Martians might not have trusted them and sent out robots instead of living creatures; the fact that the Martians, if they wished to destroy them, would naturally trick them into landing first if they could. It was too late to take any action, too late to do anything except make a firm decision not to do anything in a hurry in case the Martians, startled, should think it was war.

The inner door slid gradually open. At first there were shadows and bright reflections. Then four Martians were visible in the airlock.

Even on Earth it would have been possible to find men and women who looked much less human.

The Martians had no means of instantly teaching or learning a language by telepathy. The Earthmen were unable to work out in five minutes a method of communication through squares of numbers. The two races couldn't even construct a sign language to make possible the most abstract conversations within a quarter of an hour. The sad truth was that the Heroes and Heroines of Space, the Cream of Terra, and the assumedly intelligent Martians could only, for quite some time, grin at each other, point to themselves and exchange names, like two groups of savages.

There were two men and two women. One of the men might have walked the streets of New York without attracting any attention—though not in his loose shorts, like a baby's rompers, and curiously-constructed shirt and overall envelope. His hair was cut and parted conventionally even to Earth eyes. He was cleanshaven and he had soft brown eyes. His figure was tall, slight but well-proportioned, not thin. The other man, dressed similarly, would have passed with as little comment in Shanghai, and looked with immediate interest at Yo Ten Hok. The two girls were dressed exactly as the men, except that from the colours they wore some colours might be male colours and others female. They were both of such blinding beauty that in comparison the women of the *Astra*, chosen as they were with publicity pictures in mind, might have been merely any seven women.

They did not appear to be armed. Rosetti tried something. Smiling, moving slowly, he drew his gun from its holster and threw it in a corner. He glanced at his companions, and they did likewise. He congratulated himself on leaving Bill Tilden behind. The kid gloves were on, and Bill's large, bony hands would certainly have split them.

The Martians came forward one by one and slowly turned round like models. It was clear that if they were concealing any weapons they must be no larger than cough lozenges.

The Martians wanted them all to enter the city. Rosetti pulled his chin doubtfully. In the city they would be quite helpless. But the fact was, they could get nowhere unless they trusted the Martians. They were the visiting team. Everything was in the Martians' hands from the start.

He made gestures to ask if they were expected to take anything with them. One of the Martian girls indicated that while there was no prohibition against taking anything, nothing was necessary. They could wear Martian clothes. Her pantomime showed that facial expressions and quite a few gestures were common to both races.

Rosetti went back to the control room to pick his party, leaving Yo Ten Hok in charge at the airlock. Obviously someone would have to be left behind.

"I'll leave the women to you, Naomi," he said. "I'm taking Hok, Bill and Burrows. I think you'd better stay behind."

Naomi considered this, head on one side to get a better angle on it. "No," she said at last. "We have to stick to this system. If I don't go, who's to work with you?"

"Michlene or Joan."

"Joan, as the navigator, will have to stay. Don't let's close our eyes to the situation. The *Astra* may have to take off without us."

Rosetti nodded soberly. "Which was why I wanted to leave you. So that someone would be in charge."

"Theo will do exactly as Joan tells him, without trying to think. He's loyal and he has courage—the only thing he doesn't have is brains. Leave Joan here in charge, with Theo as her strong-arm man."

Rosetti pondered. "Sounds all right," he said.

Joan stepped forward, pale. "I wish you'd make it someone else," she said. "I'd do the wrong thing. And nobody would listen to me."

"Look, Joan," said Rosetti quietly, "you know what a mix-up this crew is. Maybe none of us should be here. It would be better if I were along as linguist and second navigator instead of boss of the whole shoot. None of us are right for the job. But the job has to be done just the same. Now, are you still crying off?"

Joan was silent. Rosetti hadn't left her much to say.

"I'll take Michlene, Sonia and Betty," said Naomi.

Rosetti nodded. "Do you think you can handle Kerens?" he asked.

Naomi cast a glance at Joan, who was lost in unhappy thought. "I think I can handle her better than Joan can," she murmured.

That was undoubtedly a point.

They went down to the airlock. The yellow Martian and Yo Ten Hok had already made progress in the Martian language. They had a vocabulary of about twenty-five words, and the Chinaman explained that the structure of the language was not dissimilar to English, except in the matter of pronouns. These were rich and qualitative, so that once a conversation was properly started, there was no need for either participant to state exactly what he was talking about.

"Or even to know?" asked Naomi curiously.

The purpose of this, Yo Ten Hok suggested, was to discourage the introduction of new factors in any discussion, and if they were really necessary, to emphasise them. Another peculiarity was the classing of all verbs into groups depending on the nature of the movement or action. Any verb which described a movement had a movement or action. But whether the similarity depended on parts of the body, the shape of the movement or some other system, Yo Ten Hok had no idea. He said modestly that a Chinaman would have least difficulty with the language. Considering the progress he had made in such a short time, Rosetti had to agree that he was probably right.

A frown he was not aware of was on Rosetti's face as he sipped a warm, sweet Martian drink at a ceremony not unlike tea-drinking in China. The eight Martians present—limited to the number of the Earth party—had made it clear that no serious business, such as language study, was expected while they were drinking. The room was large, not unlike a ward in many hospitals on Earth—cool, fresh, subtly lit, with light-coloured walls and the corners rounded. There were no windows. All light in the Martian cities was artificial. The light from the sun was no more than that of Earth's moon.

What caused Rosetti's frown was something about the Martians themselves. Not the big question of how they happened to be here, completely human in wholly artificial conditions, as if everything was done to keep them human against all the influence of the different environment. Was it simply their normalcy that puzzled

him, he wondered, or was it their patience, their lack of surprise, their calm acceptance of the situation? Was it their apparent peacefulness? He tried to clarify his thoughts by looking at the Martians in turn.

Beside Naomi was a girl who rather surprisingly made the First Officer look only moderately pretty. There was nothing unusual about her figure or features, no apparent reason why she should be more beautiful than any other women Rosetti had ever seen. Her skin was that pink-tan blend beloved of technicolour film stars, her features individually were like any Earth girl's, but . . . There was that same incredible attraction in her body, clad exactly as Naomi's now was in green slacks like Oriental shaksheer and a short, fitted jacket that covered shoulders and breast and left arms and throat and diaphragm bare. She was much the same height as Naomi and must have similar if not identical measurements. She proved, merely by sitting beside Naomi, that beauty was immeasurable and intangible.

Standing smiling down at Betty Kerens was a man who might, just as he was, have walked without question about any beach on Earth. The Martians exercised a good deal of freedom in their choice of dress. There were Martians swathed from ground to neck, or all but naked. The man wore only trunks, and did so without a trace of self-consciousness. He was tall, but not unusually so, and pretty rather than handsome.

Rosetti had always been sensitive to atmosphere, and the air of the room was charged with tension. But one could feel that without knowing what the tension was about. He did.

"Think it's poisoned?" Naomi asked him suddenly.

He started and looked down at his cup, then back to Naomi.

"You were looking at Klith as if you were trying to see the wall through him," she told him.

"I was thinking."

"Oh. Is that how you look when you think?"

"Naomi, you know there's more about these Martians than meets the eye. What do you think?"

She nodded thoughtfully. "I don't know what to think," she admitted. "But try this for size. Whoever and whatever these people are, they're very much the same as we are. If they're calm and polite and patient on the surface, there's just so much more restlessness and aggression and intrigue bottled up. I agree we've landed right in the middle of something. But I don't know any more than you do what it is."

Rosetti grunted. "That's it as far as it goes. Something else

pretty well follows. We're going to be dragged into it. They expect us to take sides. Well, before I make a move I'm going to learn their language."

After the tea-drinking Rosetti made his intention clear. The Martians appeared to have been waiting for him to make a move, and when he did they showed themselves ready to co-operate. A team of four was assigned to Rosetti and Hok, and for three days the two Earthmen did nothing but eat, sleep and learn.

Rosetti left Naomi and Bill in charge of the others, for he needed all his time and attention for study. The four girls, Bill and Burrows were entertained, taken on sight-seeing trips, shown the general lines of life in the domes, and Naomi reported fully and faithfully on everything she saw to Rosetti.

Rosetti was a natural linguist, and Yo Ten Hok turned to the study of the Martian language with a systematic concentration that was bound to get results. In a few hours they were beginning to understand the Martians. In two days they could read Martian books. On the third day they were masters of the language.

It wasn't an untidy, unsystematic tongue like most of Earth's languages. It was easy to learn in that there were only a small number of parts. It was obviously an unnatural language, a language constructed for perfection. When Rosetti needed a word he had never heard used, he could make it.

The closest parallel he could think of was shorthand. A shorthand writer didn't consciously phoneticise outlines as he wrote them. He put down certain shapes for common, often written words. But if an unusual word cropped up, he had the principles on which he could form the correct outline. The Martian language was to thought what shorthand was to speech.

In the middle of a complex argument about nothing in particular on the third day, a thought burst blindingly on Rosetti. He started involuntarily, then looked at the others to make sure they had noticed nothing. The tutors at the moment were Carb and Ress. Ress was a yellow-skinned girl whom Yo Ten Hok would obviously marry sooner or later if nothing happened to stop it. She didn't seem to know of anything. Neither did Yo Ten Hok.

Rosetti caught Hok's eye and made a face at him. The Chinaman was one of the most intelligent members of the *Astra's* crew. Rosetti didn't have to write him a letter. He understood.

Rosetti muttered something and left them. Yo Ten Hok looked so indifferent that he compelled the two Martians to be indifferent too.

Rosetti burst into Naomi's room. She was alone. She looked

up from the floor. She had gone down on her knees to examine the pattern of the carpet, which never failed to fascinate her.

"Manners!" she said reproachfully. "I might have been undressed or something."

He told her his idea. "Ridiculous," she said.

"Is it?" he demanded. "When two people who have differences want to pretend to others that they're great friends, they may get away with it. When it's two and two it's not so easy. And when it's four and four it may be impossible—even if the people for whose benefit they're making the pretence don't speak their language. Haven't you seen Ruk smiling at the redhead—what's her name—Calans or something—listening politely to her, looking friendly . . . but never touching her? Did you notice how they always make the right reactions of a friendly group—a little late? We're right in the middle of a war, Naomi—a war of the sexes!"

They brought in Bill and Micheline. Instead of disagreeing with Rosetti, as Naomi had expected, Micheline thought deeply and then said he was undoubtedly right. Bill agreed with Naomi, which made her think she must be wrong.

"You can't have a war between men and women," she said helplessly. "I mean—just think of it."

"I am thinking," said Rosetti. "I noticed how every thing was arranged neatly. Two men and two women formed the first party, four men and four women the second. I haven't been out on your conducted tours, but you tell me it's the same there. Reasonable—if we walked right into the middle of such a war and forced an armed truce. You try to fix anything with a Martian man, and it's my guess you'll find a Martian woman standing beside him to know what it is."

"Well, we can soon find out," said Bill. He saw Rosetti about to speak, and shouted him down. "You're going to tell me we're sitting on a barrel of gunpowder. Maybe we are. If so, my idea is we should start moving before someone comes along with a match."

He slid open the door of Naomi's room. If there had been no one about at the time, Rosetti and the two girls might have argued with him and changed his mind. But as it happened Klith was passing the door. Bill hooked his arm, dragged him inside and closed the door before Klith knew it was open.

"Now," said Bill grimly, "you talk to him, Rosetti."

Klith looked startled, naturally, but neither frightened nor angry. Rosetti made up his mind. He would do it as Bill would have done if he could speak the language. Perhaps it was time the

kid gloves came off.

"Let's have the truth, Klith," he said. "We landed right in the thick of a war, didn't we?"

Klith was no slow thinker. He took only a split second to assess the situation.

"I should much prefer," he said coolly, "that you brought in one of the women as well. Ress, perhaps. Or Calans. I assure you it would be much better."

"Naomi, go and get Calans," said Rosetti in English.

"If she won't come," Klith said casually, "tell her I'm here already."

Rosetti translated. "How am I to tell her anything when I don't speak the language?" Naomi objected. But she went. Five minutes later she was back with Calans.

"They have found out," said Klith. "I didn't tell them. I suggested they ask you here before I said anything."

"Playing safe, eh?" murmured Calans. She smiled without humour. "Quite right, Klith. Now what?"

What the four Terrans learned in the next few minutes reduced them to speechlessness. Over all Mars there existed a truce in the sex war which had been going on spasmodically for seventy years—more than an Earth century—and over long or short periods for centuries back. It was not a bitter truce, nor was the war a bitter conflict. Not really a war in the Terran sense. During a truce sex relations were much as on Earth, except that there was more consideration, restraint and co-operation, and less kindness, passion and affection. There was a sort of marriage, and the same couples usually took up the partnership they had left off two or three years since.

The very language had given Rosetti a hint. The two words Sune and Avar didn't mean men and women, the two sexes of the same race, but implied two different races. A Martian was born not male or female, but Sune or Avar, automatically on one side or the other. Or rather, until the next truce all children were mere cadets, looked after by the Avars, who weren't inhuman. A mother didn't kill her child because she was an Avar and he would one day be a Sune.

When a truce ended, women left the men's cities and men the women's, with no incidents, but with the coldness but scrupulous politeness of ambassadors taking official leave. Inter-communication ceased and propaganda began. It was not a war of lies, but a war of different attitudes. Men were satirised in all entertainments for women and vice versa. The best works of art and science produced



in the past or present by the enemy were read, performed, exhibited, employed and praised, but only the best. The Shakespeares and Austens and Pasteurs and Curies were common property, but all productions below the level of genius were automatically derided by the opposing faction.

When the women were childbearing no Martian died. But the rigidity of the operation of each truce was such that both sides knew in advance almost to the hour when this period would be over. Hostilities had begun long before this, but only after that point did people begin to get killed.

There were few human casualties. There was a great deal of damage to cities, property and equipment, but a good deal of equipment had to be destroyed for one Martian to die. The factions were even in numbers, knowledge and potential, and only new developments or tactics made noticeable gains. These were rare, for it was a war not of survival nor of hate, but of incompatibility.

"We thought it must be exactly the same with you," Klith said simply. "You came in a balanced party. We saw the women reported to Naomi and the men to you. It was exactly as it would have been with us."

"Then we saw," Calans added, "that you had a stronger truce than we. You and the yellow man began to learn our language, and your women apparently trusted you to uphold their rights as well as your own. You did not watch each other jealously as we do."

Rosetti translated what they said for the benefit of the others. Bill clawed the air in exasperation.

"Even now they take it for granted that we fight as they do!" he exclaimed.

"Well, don't we?" asked Naomi coolly. Micheline nodded and the two men stared at them. "The only difference is that the Martians are organised, and we aren't. Remember the disagreement you had with Joan? We . . ."

"For heaven's sake!" Rosetti exclaimed. "Don't let the atmosphere here split us into two warring sexes like the Martians."

"Oh, no," said Naomi. "I merely mean that I can see why the Martians fight. Think of literature, Harry. The whole story of the human race has been a dogfight, with the sexes kept together by the strongest of the instincts. At least the second strongest. But I'm not going to start an argument among ourselves. Look, Klith and Calans think they're right and we're fighting our last sex war over again."

Rosetti wasn't looking. He was thinking again. It was one of his habits. He was seeing Mars as it had been a few days ago, and then Mars as it suddenly became when the Martians realised they were being visited by a ship from another world. They had to sign a temporary armistice. The Terrans were a new factor, and in any war new factors had to be counted in at the earliest opportunity.

What did Mars expect of Earth . . . peace? Peace at last, after centuries of war, on the basis of Earth's apparent compromise between the sexes? Or war?

A strong possibility—a very strong possibility—was that the Martians had agreed to divide the crew of the *Astra*, and all the other Earthlings they needed, into so many mares and stallions so that they could carry on this fantastic war of theirs for ever!

It's not always safe to rely on *laissez-faire* for the best results, and Rosetti knew it. But he also knew his own limitations. Perhaps the whole Space Project should have been handled differently—indeed, certainly it should.

But it was too late to go back and do it all over again. He wasn't a leader, and no one knew that better than he did. He didn't think he should try to be what he was not. He wasn't the man to try to boss the show and shape the destiny of two worlds. He wasn't

a fighter and he wasn't a philosopher. Merely a sort of mystic who trusted hunches, not because he believed it was the best thing to do, but because for him it was the only thing to do.

So he went back to the *Astra*, dismantled the drive and doctored the fuel in the hope that only he would be able to make the ship fly back to Earth. After all, the Martians hadn't space travel. Their talents seemed to run in other directions. He locked up the ship and took Joan and the others back to the Martian city. Then he sat back and waited to see what would happen.

Betty Kerens burst in on a council meeting. She knew she wasn't welcome, and had obviously come because she had something to say. There was a carelessness about her bearing which was clearly assumed. She wasn't a good actress.

"Well, now you really have something to talk about," she said. There was both satisfaction and uneasy defiance in her tone.

"What have you done, blown up a dome?" Rosetti asked.

"No. I've married Klith."

She expected sensation. She got only dead silence.

"It's legal," she said defiantly. "We're on Mars, aren't we?"

"We've certainly been working on that assumption," Naomi remarked.

Betty looked more uneasy and more defiant than ever. She stood leaning against the door, in Martian costume, her chest heaving a little and her chin stuck out. She looked almost pretty enough, Rosetti thought, to be a Martian girl.

"What do you expect us to do about it?" he asked.

She frowned, bewildered. "You're not angry? You don't . . .?"

"It had to happen. In due course Naomi will marry a Martian named Ruk and Micheline a Martian named Vol and Joan a Martian whose name I haven't yet discovered and Bill a Martian girl called Vita and . . ."

"Then . . . you're the captain. Will you marry us again, just to make sure?"

"Why not? Nothing like making sure."

"I thought . . . anything nice would be forbidden. It always is."

"And you thought it would be nice to marry Klith?"

"Oh, yes!"

"That settles it," said Naomi. "It would be nice to marry Ruk, too."

"And Vol," Micheline observed. "But in all this consideration

of the niceness of everything, we must not forget how nice it would be to know exactly what we are doing before we do it. We . . ."

"If this is a senate session," Betty Kerens interrupted, "I'll get back to Klith. I know I'm not a member, anyway. You needn't be polite."

Before the door had closed behind her they were talking again.

When Betty Kerens and Klith had been married twice the position was no clearer, since Betty had never been a confidante of Rosetti's party anyway. But it was pointed out that if one of the select group followed her example, they might all learn something. (By this time, of course, they all spoke Martian, more or less.) They might, for one thing, learn the Martian point of view, since Betty and Klith obviously had no secrets from each other.

So Naomi nobly sacrificed herself and married Ruk. For a few days she was merely ecstatic, and no help to Rosetti and the others. Her Martian came on by leaps and bounds.

But when she emerged from her ocean of bliss she came out like a rocket.

She burst wildly on Rosetti, Bill and Joan as they were trying to make sense of a Martian book. She had thrown a wrap over nothing in particular, and her hair was in her eyes.

"Let's get to the ship," she said briefly.

They were an intelligent group. They didn't ask questions and they didn't argue. There was only one thing they had to know, and that was whether they were to collect the others or get on the run at once. Rosetti put the straight question and he got a straight answer.

"Just Hok and Micheline," said Naomi. "We won't have time to collect them all."

Joan dashed to waken Micheline. The Martians kept no regular hours, with no essential difference between night and day, and the Terrans had fallen into the same habit of sleeping when they were tired. Naomi threw on Martian clothes and in a matter of seconds they were out of the building, Micheline not really awake yet.

They were well known in the city, but no one had ever interfered with them. It was the same now—for a while. They had almost reached the dome when they heard running feet behind them. A startled glance over his shoulder showed Rosetti what seemed to be half the population of Mars on their heels—men and women.

Still only Naomi knew what it was all about. Rosetti waited for guidance from her.

"Run," she shouted. "Get to the ship. Fight if we have to. They won't kill us if they can help it."

They obeyed. But there were Martians in front of them as well as behind. The garrison, naturally, was right at the dome. And to reach the ship they needed one of the Martian tractors.

Suddenly the fight was on. Rosetti was tensed for armoured attack. But the Martians were not used to small arms. Their fighting, for the most part, was done at long range.

It didn't take long for it to become clear that what seemed impossible odds weren't quite impossible. The Terrans and the Martians were unarmed. There were twenty Martians to each of them, but a Martian could only hurt Rosetti or Bill slightly, while one of their blows would finish a Martian at least as far as that fight was concerned—perhaps for ever. It was mad, fighting and killing when they didn't know why, but they trusted Naomi.

Gradually the Terrans made their way through the Martians towards the dome. There was nothing the puny Martians could do to stop them. Even their flesh was soft and weak beside that of the Terrans. Bill and Rosetti and Hok at first tried to protect the girls, but soon they found the girls, too, could handle Martians without much trouble.

When Bill reached one of the tanks it was all over. He dragged Michelene after him, and once he had a position to hold he could have held it against the Martians for ever. One by one he was joined by the others, battling their way through crowds of Martians.

Still they expected bigger weapons to come into play. The tank seemed incredibly slow. It was automatic for the lock to open for it—nothing the Martians could do, apparently, could stop that—at any rate, not in time.

The few yards to the ship were the longest in the experience of any of them. It seemed a distance of hundreds of miles. But at last they had reached the airlock and were inside in a few seconds. Rosetti darted away to get the ship airworthy.

Taking off should have been a slow, careful operation. For the six Terrans it had to be done in a hurry or not at all. Rosetti had no idea of how complete the transformation of the Martians from friends to enemies had been. He didn't feel inclined, however, to take any chances, and Naomi, who did know what was going on, said nothing to indicate that he should.

The ship came unstuck in anything but the way it should. It

was a dramatic escape, though none of them seemed to be built for drama.

It might have been a magnificent take-off, with everyone rising above himself in the emergency and guessing exactly right since there was no time for anything but guessing. It wasn't. It might have been a fair take-off, if luck had been on their side. It wasn't. It might at least have been a take-off without disaster, if luck hadn't been right against them. It wasn't that either.

Rosetti had been right, perhaps, in his precautions—dismantling the drive and doctoring the fuel. But they were catastrophic when it turned out that they had to make a hurried departure. He had to undo his work in a few seconds. Some of the jobs he did hurriedly for split seconds before the Martians could use their heavy artillery (or whatever else they used in its place) were as perfect as if he had all the time in the world to do them.

But one at least wasn't. The ship came off the ground reluctantly, decided it wasn't ready for interplanetary flight and dived right back again.

The noise alone as they crashed into the dust of Mars told them that there would be no second chance.

They gathered in the control room. Naomi could talk now. There was nothing for them to do but wait. Perhaps the Martians would destroy them. Perhaps they would be taken prisoners. Either way, the matter was out of their hands.

Naomi sighed and threw herself in the pilot's chair.

"It was as we thought," she said. "They wanted us merely as queen bees and drones to help them to carry out their war. With us, they could have a *real* war. They . . ."

"Wait a minute," said Rosetti. "I know you should tell this your own way, but after all, I can't see that we'd make so much difference. There's only fourteen of us, and millions of Martians."

"There was one branch of Martian science," Naomi said, "that they were careful to keep from us. Genetics. We'd have made a lot of difference." She shrugged. "In fact, the six of us don't matter. Those of us who are left in the city are enough. Ruk told me all about it. It didn't occur to him, despite all they've seen of us, that I might have other ideas. When the truce was over the men among us would go to the women's cities and we girls to the men's. Then each side would be independent of the other and they could really have a war."

Rosetti was still puzzled. So, he saw, was Micheline, who, like him, had seen something the others so far seemed to have missed. "Was that all," he asked.

"All!" Bill shouted. "Isn't it enough?"

"Not," said Micheline gently, "to make Naomi leave Ruk." They stared at her and at each other.

"To a woman nationality is not so important," Micheline went on. "That is why it was women who married Martians first. You men could not forget you were Americans or South Africans or whatever it was so easily. But . . ."

"You're right," said Naomi. She was calm now. "It wasn't easy to leave Ruk, and that wasn't all. There was something else. When you get deadly enemies together, forced to work together, they can't help looking for advantages they can take which will give them victory when the truce is over. It was like that with the Martians, too. They saw a very simple thing they could do, independently, but inevitably. The Avars decided to kill the women of our party. And quite independently the Sunes decided to kill all the men."

Rosetti hardly noticed Bill's outburst at this. As ever, given the least excuse, he was thinking. He had plenty of excuse now.

"Since they are so evenly balanced," Naomi continued, "a small thing could make all the difference. Sooner or later they would have been fighting over us. The one thing of which we could be certain is that whenever they decided the truce was to end, our lives wouldn't be worth a red cent. So I thought we'd better get out. I don't know why the Sunes and Avars combined to try to stop us just now. Maybe they came to a quick decision that they'd rather stick to the first agreement than lose us altogether."

"What did you do with Ruk?" asked Micheline curiously.

"Hit him over the head," said Naomi, unhappily. "I was afraid of hitting him too hard. Apparently I didn't hit him hard enough."

Rosetti only half heard her explaining how the Martians could use artificial insemination so that one male could fertilise a nation of women, and how fertilised ova could be removed from females and incubated. The Sunes would be at a slight disadvantage, for reproduction from one woman and many men was much slower than the other way round, even when each fertilised ovum was split into sextuplets. But with seven women the disadvantage could be small.

"There's a tractor coming out," Joan reported from the observation window.

They crowded to see it. Rosetti noticed Joan was much calmer than when she had been under no particular stress. It seemed that there came a time when she became too nervous to be nervous.

"Can't we do *something*?" Bill demanded. "Are we just going to wait here and let them do what they like with us?"

"I can't see any point in fighting back," said Rosetti. "Oh, I know it's what we're supposed to do—die fighting like the heroes and heroines we're supposed to be. But can you tell me any good it will do? Suppose we keep blowing up tractors. They'll merely decide in the end we're too much of a nuisance and destroy us."

"And to tell the truth," Micheline admitted, "I should much rather submit to—what is that beautiful phrase you have for it in English?—a fate worse than death."

"You would," Bill retorted. "Women don't mind being treated as cattle. But . . ."

"Quiet, Bill," said Rosetti. "One thing you haven't made clear, Naomi. Perhaps you don't know. If the Sunes hate the Avars, and vice versa, what is this but a postponement? I mean, suppose you joined the Sunes and they killed off all the Avars. In a few years' time wouldn't they start a new sex war with you and your daughters and grand daughters?"

"They don't think so. That's the curious thing. They don't think they'd ever fight with us. They say the Terrans and themselves are not one race, but two. Two who have developed towards each other so that there is now no physical difference. But a result of interbreeding, according to their theory, is that what we might call the alpha men and beta women always produce alpha male and beta female offspring.

"Of course!" Rosetti exclaimed. "The sexes have somehow become mixed. The women who should have been on Earth with men like us are here—the Avars. Bill, what did you think of Martian women, when you first saw them?"

Bill rolled his eyes. It was enough.

"And the women rushed right to the arms of the Sunes," Rosetti went on. "If sex is the oldest human drive, likeness is the next. If a white man has a choice, he picks a white woman. And this is a step further. If he finds women really of his own race, he doesn't take long to know it. We should have seen that whenever we saw the Avars."

"And we the Sunes," said Naomi.

They heard hammering at the airlock.

"Let's forget the war," said Rosetti, "and make the Sunes and Avars forget it for a while too, if we can. There's a lot of things we want to bring out in the open and discuss. Joan, stick close to me and don't look so scared."

Joan looked up from her reverie. "Why do you always pick

on me?" she asked indignantly.

Rosetti was almost persuaded into thinking about that instead of the fact that they might have only a few minutes to live. Why *did* he always pick on Joan?

"We'll talk about that later," he said. "Meantime we'll find out if the Martians are ready to come down to brass tacks."

Curiously enough, the Martians were. Perhaps they realised that they had been too hasty. Perhaps they suddenly remembered that the fourteen Terrans represented a world of some two billion inhabitants. At any rate, they had second thoughts.

Cynics would have laughed—and eventually did—at the idea of a people like the Terrans bringing peace to a race like the Martians. But that was the result.

At the first council meeting, now that all the Terrans could get by in Martian, and a few of the Martians had begun to learn English, Bill made a vigorous speech. He was a much better man to do that than Rosetti. He told the Martians a great many things, and the Martians, male and female, were impressed. They had very little to feel inferior about in anything else in Earth's history, but the one thing in which Earth seemed vastly superior to Mars was in the compromise reached between men and women. And another thing that kept that initial conference mild and tentative was the fact that as yet no one knew how the alpha men would get on with the alpha women over a period. That wanted settling before any lasting decision was taken.

Then Rosetti spoke. He gave Earth's attitude to the Sune-Avar war briefly and in a way that was very much to the point. He pointed out that if in their future relations Earth and Mars weren't equal, the balance of power was likely to be with Earth. The Terrans were not only vastly superior in numbers, they were more forceful—and they had a working truce between the sexes, which was more than the Martians were likely to have.

In fact, Rosetti made it clear that the Martians had better be very careful. They duly reconsidered.

Then Naomi carried on his speech. They thought it would be better that way. Psychologically it had an excellent effect on the Martians that Naomi and Rosetti could say the same thing and obviously mean it.

So Rosetti and the others from the *Astra*, backed by the Martians' own scientists (of both sexes) made it perfectly clear that for the moment, at any rate, the war was over. And that it was as

likely as not that it was over for ever.

Naomi departed happily with Ruk, who had a bump on his head but bore no malice. All was well once more in the little love-nest.

Would it last? They all wondered. It seemed more than a possibility, despite what the Martian savants said and what had been tentatively agreed, that if the two races were as incompatible as the Martians thought there would eventually be a whale of an inter-planetary war, with Naomi, Ruk, Micheline and Vol on one side and Bill and Vita and Rosetti on the other.

But then Rosetti burst his little bombshell.

It was the last council meeting before the *Astra* left for Earth again, leaving half her original crew on Mars and taking back with her as many Martians. Rosetti was going with the ship, but Naomi was staying behind, for the moment, with Ruk. His English wasn't so hot yet. He still insisted on making up his own words.

"There's one last thing to be said," Rosetti remarked.

"Oh?" asked Naomi with interest. "I thought we'd already had the last world.

"This is the period after it, then." They were in a room high above the city, looking out across it. Through the dome they could see the *Astra*, repaired by Martian technicians who, had never developed space flight but didn't take long to catch up once they got the idea. The ship was poised ready for flight, if anything, better than when she had set out for Mars.

"We've all been worried about the outcome of this," said Rosetti. "Not about what would happen this generation, or the next generation, or even in ten generations, but about what might happen when the two races we represent here have split up and settled in new homes. Race war? Inevitable, you might think. I don't. I don't think there will ever be race war. And this is why. Joan, you know, too."

Joan looked up, startled for a moment, and then with an understanding that had not yet come to the four others. She looked happier than they had ever seen her. She wasn't a chronically happy type.

"You see," Rosetti went on, "every American doesn't marry another American. If he travels he finds wonderful girls in every country. Particularly if he goes to Mars. But even after having a look round Mars, he may be mulish and marry an Australian."

They all stared at Joan, who grinned back at them.

"Or he may go back and marry an American after all," said Rosetti quietly. "Oh, no doubt it's true that there are two different

aces which somehow got mixed. But they've been friends for a long time on Earth, and they managed to get on, even on Mars. I don't think they'll ever pair off neatly two by two. Joan and I are going back together!

"Well," said Naomi. She must have thought she had expressed herself perfectly, for she said it again.

"I will try to congratulate you, Joan," said Micheline, "but my heart is, as you say, not inside it. If you want an Earthman, that is very well, but . . ."

"I want an Earthman," Joan said clearly. "This one. The more Martians I saw, the surer I was."

"Not that he's too bad, as Earthmen go," Naomi admitted, "still . . . Anyway, you seem to mean it. You could have walked from here to there over prostrate Martians if you'd wanted to. Well, Harry, as you say, if there's many like you and Joan that solves the problem. I don't say I can understand it, but it's convenient all round."

A few hours later the *Astra* was on the way back to Earth. Naomi had been deputed to marry Joan and Rosetti, and she did it, although all the way through the ceremony she kept looking doubtfully from one to the other and at Ruk, who was Rosetti's best man, as if expecting one of them to say clearly and very definitely: "I don't!" But neither Rosetti nor Joan had second thoughts, and afterwards they looked as happy as if Joan had been born on Mars.

It didn't end there, of course. Millions of words were written in all the languages of Earth and Mars, except Latin, on how Earth women had come to be on Mars and Martian men on Earth—or the other way round. Some Terran savants denounced the whole idea that there had been a race mix-up, meanwhile finding themselves Martian wives. Devout Christians opposed everything at first on the grounds that there was no ruling in the Bible. Then they met Martian women, or Martian men, and they discovered with relief that after all there was nothing against it in the Bible.

There was some trouble with polygamist races, particularly one sultan who wanted to marry ten thousand Martian women. Many Earth marriages were discreetly forgotten, but as one politician remarked somewhere: "Marriage was made for man—and woman, of course—not man—or woman—for marriage." Which must have been true, for he had married Vita's sister and his erstwhile wife had married Vita's brother, probably out of a strong sense of duty.

There was so much inter-space travel and race (or species)

mingling that all the governments of the two planets had to publish coloured brochures for the guidance of their citizens. The blue American one ended: "If you see a girl and catch yourself on the point of whistling, she's Terran. If you don't catch yourself, she's Martian. (If the remarks in this brochure do not seem to apply, you are a girl and should read the pink version.)"

Rosetti and Joan ran a space line until their children took it over, by which time it was generally decided that it was just as well space-travel had been discovered, and three hundred and ninety-four theories had been put forward to account for the wrong sexes being on the right planet. Joan's favourite was the one that Earth and Mars and the Asteroids had once been one planet occupied by two races, and that when it broke up only one man and one woman had been left alive on each of the large fragments—the wrong man and woman, at that. It wasn't that she thought the theory was probable. She just liked it.

But Rosetti liked the theological theory that after the Fall, God in his wrath had cleft the natural mates asunder and placed forty-six million miles of space between them, so that only by the sweat of his brow and the exercise of his brain could man ever be happy again.

"That makes us unhappy," he told Joan.

She kissed him. "Speak for yourself," she whispered.

J. T. M'INTOSH



The Editor and Publisher of
NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

Wishes all his readers

A Merry Christmas

and a

Peaceful and Prosperous New Year.

Tea Party

*On the surface, everything was quiet and beautiful.
But underground the old man was at play.*

CAROLINE sat in the garden and played with her toys. A chubby four, pushing five, she wore a short polka-dot dress covered with a clean apron bright with little animals and nursery-land people. Her tow-coloured hair was gathered into plaits and tied with shining yellow ribbon. Her little bare feet were thrust into rabbit slippers, pink and floppy eared, with gleaming button-eyes and gentle smiling mouths.

She sat, frowning a little, as she carefully poured milk into several cups of cheerful red plastic and broke a fairy cake into six unequal portions. Cat stretched in the sun, watching her with his smoky yellow eyes, and flexing his needle-sharp claws.

He sniffed at the cake, then lapped at his milk with a long pink tongue, twitching his whiskers a little as they touched the sides of the cup. Teddy bear wasn't hungry and Dolly was being naughty. Gnome and Fairy as usual were greedy and wanted more.

Caroline knew that Gnome and Fairy weren't really there, that they were only pretend people, but she knew all about them from her story books, the ones Mummy read to her at bedtime, and to her they were very real.

Gnome was like a very old man with a long white beard and pointed shoes and hat, while Fairy had wings and carried a wand. They came to tea whenever Caroline wanted them to, and sometimes they fetched other nursery-land people with them, but they were her favourites. Teddy Bear and Dolly came as well, of course, but Cat was sometimes naughty and wouldn't sit still and drink his milk.

Today, though, he was very good.

She tutted, just as Mummy tutted when she wouldn't eat her dinner, and looked sternly at Dolly.

"Eat your cake," she said, and held it to the china lips. "Eat it all up like a good girl."

Dolly said nothing and still wouldn't eat her cake. Caroline pursed her lips and rested plump hands in the region of her waist.

"You're so bad," she said firmly. "If you won't eat your cake I'll give it to Teddy Bear!"

Teddy sat and stared at her with his bright button-eyes not saying a word. Caroline smiled at him and picked him up, feeling the scratchiness of his short brown fur against her plump arms.

"Teddy is a good boy," she said, hugging him until he squeaked. "Why can't you be good like he is?"

Dolly sat stubborn and still wouldn't speak.

Caroline sighed and sat Teddy down beside her.

"You are a bad girl, Dolly, and I'm going to smack you hard!" Picking her up she turned Dolly over her knee.

"Mamaaa."

"It's no good crying." Caroline was very firm. "You shouldn't have been so naughty. You are a bad girl and wouldn't eat your cake."

Gently she smacked Dolly, not too hard, because she loved her and didn't really want to hurt her.

"There! Will you be a good girl now?"

"Mamaaa."

"Sit beside Teddy and eat up all your cake and grow big and strong."

She frowned at Teddy, he seemed to be laughing at her, his bright button-eyes reflecting the warm sun and his little round ears golden and fuzzy looking.

"Don't laugh at Dolly, Teddy," she said firmly, just as Mummy spoke when *she* had been naughty. "She is a good girl. Now drink your milk or I won't let you have any more cake."

Cat grinned and arched his back, his long tail quivering like a pennon as he yawned. He walked delicately between the tea things and rubbed his head against Caroline's leg, his fur tickling

and feeling warm and soft against the bare skin.

He purred, then rolled over on his back and stretched all four of his legs, waiting for her to rub his tummy and catching at her hand with his velvet paws.

Inside the house Mummy was singing and a bee droned from flower to flower as he collected his tea. The sun was warm and the air full of the scent of growing things.

It was very peaceful.

The general sat in the bomb-proof shelter and played with his toys.

A sparse sixty, pushing seventy, he wore his uniform like a second skin, the fine material heavy with medal ribbons and gilt insignia. His almost naked head glistened pink and white in the light of the flourescents and this thin, lipless mouth was framed by a close-clipped moustache. His feet were thrust into black knee-boots and a gold braided cap and pistol belt hung on a rack against the wall.

He sat, frowning down at the map before him, a coloured, lined and intricate section of the habitable globe. He traced paths on the map with a wrinkled finger, sere and hooked with age, claw-like, vulture-like, a thing of stained nails, swollen knuckles and parchment skin.

He looked at the men sitting round the table. Air, dressed all in blue and silver. Sea, darker blue and gold. Land, khaki and black plastic, scarlet flashes and stained webbing.

He knew that they didn't really agree with him, but they came whenever he wanted them to, and they would continue to come at his call. He had the power. He was the leader of combined operations and these men were pawns to be moved at his whim.

Toys!

Ships and mines, planes and bombs, tanks and invading armies. He had played with them all his life, played the game of theoretical war, at the Academy, on the field in manoeuvres, and twice now in actual combat.

War!

It was his life, his profession, the only thing he knew, and so he sat at his table deep beneath the ground, away from the sun, the sweet scent of growing things, the beauty of a summer's afternoon, and gave orders in a harsh rustling voice.

"It has been decided. Air will commence the operation, followed by Sea and Land. A crippling blow to fling the enemy into

chaos, then the blockade and invasion. Any questions?"

It was a rhetorical thing to say, but it was always said. These men weren't here to ask questions, they were here to receive orders and to obey them blindly without question or thought, but the old forms die hard.

Air shifted a little on his seat and tried to meet the general's glaring eyes.

"Have they been notified?"

"Who?"

"The enemy, of course, who else?"

The general sneered as he stared at the trim figure in blue and silver. His thin old hands caressed the map with an almost loving touch, and he inflated his chest a little, the light gleaming from his massive insignia.

"You will notify them," he said deliberately. "Your bombs will tell them that they are at war."

"I see." Air lowered his eyes, he was almost an intelligent man. "Atomics?"

"No. Later perhaps, but not at first. We need their cities, their factories, the soil of their fields and the new explosives are more suited to local damage. I have prepared your bombing pattern. Here."

He threw a map across the desk and elaborated the legend traced on the smooth paper.

"Railway termini and power stations. Road junctions and warehouses. Water works and sewage disposal plants. A few hospitals, and, naturally, the airports and barracks. Well?"

"Hospitals?" Air seemed uncomfortable.

"Yes. Shifting the patients will cause great confusion and the moral effect will be high." The old man chuckled. "Everyone with a relative who has been hospitalised will be frantic to know what has happened to them. The medical services will be overburdened and the civilian population thrown into panic. It will make our victory much easier."

He glanced at the others.

"Any questions?"

Air shook his head, folded his map into a neat bundle.

Sea shrugged, his mind already with his fleets.

Land grunted. As usual, he would have most of the work and least of the credit.

The general shivered a little. He was an old man and his blood ran thin in his withered veins. He looked at the others.

"That will be all, gentlemen. You know the time of attack,

but in the meanwhile, will you join me in tea?

They nodded, not daring to refuse, and the old man pressed a button with his claw-like finger.

It wasn't tea-time, of course, but then time had long ceased to have meaning in the bomb proof, and meals were served when ordered, day or night, morning or afternoon.

And so they sat and sipped their bitter tea and nibbled at little cakes, not enjoying them, their minds elsewhere, eager to get through the meal and be away.

The milk was gone, and the cake, and the red plastic tea things lay scattered over the grass, making bright touches of colour against the green. Caroline sat, feeling rather swollen after eating all the cake and drinking almost all of the milk, then slowly began to gather up her tea set.

Dolly and Teddy Bear sat and watched her, while Cat blinked smoky eyes and licked the long plume of his tail.

Mummy called from within the house.

"Carol! Come in now, darling."

"Yes, Mummy," she said, and remained sitting where she was, staring at the droning bee and feeling the sun nice and warm against the bare skin of her legs and arms.

It was so nice in the garden. She felt happy and a little sleepy as she sat on the grass, and the long, floppy ears of her rabbit slippers tickled her instep as they stared with wide mouths at the blue of the sky as if laughing with sheer contentment.

A second bee joined the first, droning with a deep, soft murmur, throbbing and humming as it swept across the azure bowl of the sky.

"Carol!" Mummy stood just within the garden and her voice sounded just as it did when she was angry or when Daddy had done something naughty. "Carol! Come on in this very minute!"

"Yes, Mummy."

Reluctantly she struggled to her feet and stood looking down at the scattered tea things. Dolly and Teddy Bear stared at her in silent reproach at being forgotten, and Cat looked alert, ready for his tea.

Slowly she began to collect the tea things, not wanting to leave the warmth of the garden, and listening to the twin murmur of bees. As she expected, Mummy came into the garden and made a sudden grab at her. She broke away, laughing, eager for this more exciting game, her plump little legs thrusting at the grass as she ran in twisting circles.

"You can't catch me!" she chanted. "You can't catch me! You can't . . ."

The first blast struck!

It came as a shattering noise and a great wind. It shook and thundered, roaring and snarling, shaking the houses and darkening the sky. Glass splintered in a thousand crystalline tinklings and the air was full of smoke and dirt, powdered brick and pulverised concrete, swirling and writhing like fog or the smoke from a garden fire.

She stood and screamed with shock and fear, her little heart leaping against her ribs and the easy tears of youth streaming down her little round cheeks.

"Mummy!"

Mummy didn't answer. Mummy lay just within the garden, her hair across her face, and her arms white and limp as they sprawled across the grass.

"Mummy!"

Something thick and red and nasty streamed from Mummy's head. It stained the grass and spread in a great pool from the soft dark hair. It touched her foot and the rabbit slippers became a deeper pink, the long floppy ears trailing ugly marks across her instep, and the bright eyes stained and dull.

"Mummy!"

Mummy didn't answer!

Cat whimpered from near the tea things. He lay on his side, his tiger-fur wet and sticky, and the proud plume of his tail bedraggled and matted with dirt and wet. He looked appealingly at her with his smoky yellow eyes, and tried to lick his side with his long pink tongue. Glass sprinkled the garden, and a big piece lay beside him, dull now, and with fur sticking to the sharp edges.

Caroline whimpered with fear and terror. She picked up Dolly then screamed as a china arm came off in her hand and a china head rolled from a china body.

"Mamaaa."

Teddy Bear stared at her with his bright, button-eyes. She snatched him to her, hugging him until he squeaked, and felt the scratchiness of his short brown fur as it rubbed against her bare arms.

"Mummy doesn't answer," she whimpered to the bear. "Make her answer me, Teddy! Make her answer!"

The second blast struck!

She screamed again, screamed with all the horror of outraged nature, her little throat sore and her little face all screwed up.

She stopped screaming, and felt sick and ill as dust swirled around her and the air was full of dirt and smoke and nasty smells.

Teddy Bear squeaked as she crushed him against her chest, and she stared at him, wanting to be sick just like that time at her last party when she had eaten too much ice cream and cake. Her apron was covered with a nasty red stuff; it hid all the brightly-coloured animals and the little nursery-people, and she knew that it was blood.

Pain came then, pain and terror and mind-shattering fear.

"Mummy!"

But Mummy lay silent, face down on the grass, her head a soggy red ruin.

"Cat!"

But Cat lay with wide, dead eyes staring yellowly at the dust-filled sky.

"Dolly!"

But Dolly was broken in a thousand pieces, the flesh-coloured china of her body mingled with the shattered red plastic of the tea set.

"Teddy Bear!"

He stared at her, his golden-brown fur stained with her blood, his sewn mouth still in its eternal cat-grin, and his little round ears deaf to her plea.

She sagged, a little girl, four pushing five, with the yellow ribbon tied round her plaits dirty and soiled, her once-clean apron a red horror, and her rabbit slippers thick with her mother's blood.

She sagged, a tiny scrap of humanity, with the blood streaming from her mouth, from her blast-crushed chest and ruined body, then slowly she fell towards the stained grass and the scattered ruin of her toys.

Teddy Bear stared at her, crushed tight against her chest, then his bright button-eyes glared over her shoulder at the collapsing wall of the house.

She had been such a *little* girl.

E. C. TUBB



Sustained Pressure

Like the West of old, Venus was a world of hard work, hard play and hard men. Then Miranda landed with her concertina.

Illustrated by Alan Hunter.

IN thick, cloying mist the ship moaned like a tormented ghost of monstrous size. It descended slowly, warily, feeling with invisible fingers for a place in which to sit.

Those below stood staring up into the fog, not sensing the electronic fingers, seeing nothing. A bunch of hard-bitten, bearded men in oiled slickers down which moisture trickled in thin streams.

After a little while the fog appeared to solidify into an enormous wet cylinder with a steaming end. The ship came down, touched, settled. A sluggish wave of damp earth hunched itself either side of the curved hull.

Airlocks opened, duralumin gangways slid forth. The bearded ones clustered closer, avid for new faces. A shock-haired, red-whiskered man was the first to emerge, staggering under the weight of numerous bags and packs, feeling his way down the metal steps.

Somebody back of the audience yelled, "Old Firelip, as I live and breathe!"

The newcomer paused on the gangway, screwed up rheumy

eyes as he sought to identify the caller. "Duckass, no less! How come the parole board let *you* out?"

Listeners grinned, immediately accepted the arrival as one of themselves. He had the two best qualifications, namely, a ready tongue and a friend in the waiting mob.

A fat man came next, waddling down and letting his bags go bump-bump-bump from step to step as he dragged them behind. He wore three chins and an expression of moony amiability.

"Lookie, lookie, lookie, here comes Cookie," invited a brawny roughneck.

The others chuckled. The fat man stopped, studied the commentator, spoke in high-pitched but undisturbed tones: "You've second sight, mister. A cook is just what I am."

"Then my belly says you're a year overdue," retorted the other. "The few gals we've got here can do everything but that."

"Everything?" asked the fat man, with pointed interest.

"You try 'em sometime."

"Maybe I will." He proceeded the rest of the way down, his kit still bumping. Anything breakable therein was having a run of hard luck.

A dozen nondescripts followed, all heavily burdened with everything but the kitchen sink. Pioneers with their personal worlds on their backs.

Several ship's officers and a few of the crew came down for a gossip, a sniff of moist air and a stamp on real ground. After them, another string of people who looked like nobody in particular and wanted to stay that way. A few had the air of still trying to thwart the circulation of police photographs.

"Where's the molar-mauler?" bawled an onlooker with a lopsided face.

"Me," responded a white-haired ancient, trying to lug four boxes at once.

Gumboil grabbed two of them, said: "You got a customer right now. Good thing you've come, Pop. Another day and I'd be off my nut."

They moved toward the nearby shanty town. The rest of the crowd stayed to watch the ship, men bored by frontier solitude and thankful for an event.

A man who oozed officialdom showed himself at the airlock, stared out with cold authority. Characteristically, they bristled at the sight of him. He went inside, did not reappear. It wasn't six months since they'd pulled a tax-adviser to pieces.

Several sluggards emerged, one dragging a pack resembling a

tightly wrapped haystack. Half a dozen helped get it down amid a shower of wisecracks concerning weak bladders and portable comfort stations. The owner registered acute embarrassment.

Two girls came out, suddenly silencing the wits. They were full-lipped, full-busted, had brilliant eyes and emphatic hips. Both were bottle-blondes. A distinct sigh ran through the audience. The girls smirked knowingly, revealing white teeth. They tripped down the gangway with dainty steps and beckoning backsides. Four of the crew toted their bags, surrendered them to eager helpers.

"Annie's place?"

The girls nodded, giggled, weighed up the hungry clientele. Two barrel-chested men indulged an acrimonious shoving match for the right to bear a bag on which both had laid hands simultaneously. They solved the problem by carrying it between them, giving alternate tugs to tear it from the other at every tenth step.

Came a pause while the cargo-hatch opened, a long-armed hoist swung out, began to dump boxes and crates. A few of the crowd shifted stance to get closer look of the unloading.

Another girl appeared, accompanied by a ship's officer. She was considerably different from her bosomy predecessors: small, slender, oval-faced and cool. Her black hair was natural, her equally black eyes not glassy, her expression slightly wistful rather than hard. Carefully the officer helped her down the steps, shook hands with her at bottom.

"G'wan, kiss her, you dummy," advised a hoarse voice.

"Sailors don't care," encouraged another.

"Love 'em and leave 'em," added a third.

For a moment the officer looked as if he'd like to make something of it. He hesitated, glowered at the crowd to their immense satisfaction. Then he whispered anxiously to the girl, apparently questioning the wisdom of her remaining on this world alone. She smiled, shook her head.

"Not tonight, Cuthbert," jibed a nearby toughie.

"You've had your share," contributed another. "Don't be greedy."

"Give *real* men a chance," suggested somebody else.

Several chortled at that sally, their tones loud and coarse. One of them smacked his lips in exaggerated anticipation. The officer hung around, reluctant to go, finally mounted the gangway and went inside. His expression was bothered.

Left by herself the girl eyed the hairy mob with calm self-possession. They returned the compliment, openly taking in her slender legs, narrow hips, black hair. They undressed her with

hungry eyes.

"Doing anything tonight, Baby?" inquired a bear disguised as a man.

"Wait your turn, Bulstrode," ordered a scar-faced neighbour. He spat on thick, calloused fingers, combed his hair with them, straightened an invisible tie. "This one is for gentlemen only." He leered with undisguised appetite at the subject of his remarks. "Isn't that so, Sweetie?"

"All men are gentlemen." She switched her gaze to Bulstrode, surveying him with a kind of dark-eyed innocence. "When they wish to be."

Bulstrode's optics dulled and his huge fingers twitched while he digested this. It took him quite a time. When he spoke again it was in an apologetic rumble.

"I was only joking, Lady. I sort of thought —"

"She isn't interested, you hairy ape," interjected Scarface. "Don't use your breath to display your ignorance." He rubbed his bristly chin, gave another pull to the non-existent tie. "Can I carry your bags to Annie's place, Honey-pie?"

Shuffling slowly around on big feet, Bulstrode grunted: "What makes you think she's heading for Annie's? Why, you slit-cheeked, half-eared louse!" Extending a spade-sized hand he spread it across the other's face, curled his fingers and squeezed.

The victim gurgled convulsively behind the horny palm, made frantic pulls at the thick wrist, finally kicked him on the shin. Ignoring that, Bulstrode began to twist the face leftward, bending him sidewise.

"Stop it!" ordered the girl.

Still holding on, Bulstrode looked over a massive shoulder and said, "Hey?"

"Stop it!" she repeated. "You wouldn't behave that way at home."

Bulstrode let go, examined his hand as if he had never noticed it before. His opponent made snuffling noises, voiced a lurid oath, let go a haymaker. It caught the big man smack on the chin, rattling his teeth but not knocking him down.

Sweeping a columnar arm around in the manner of one trying to brush away an annoying fly, Bulstrode pleaded, "Look, lady, just turn your back a minute while I kill him."

"Don't be silly." Her black eyes surveyed the pair of them. "You're like overgrown children. You don't even know what you're squabbling about—do you?"

They became sheepish, didn't answer.

"Do you?" she insisted.

A tall, gray-haired individual spoke from the front rank of the vastly entertained audience. "You're not at home now, ma'am. This is Venus. Home never comes nearer than thirty million miles."

"Home is as near as your memory permits," she contradicted.

"Maybe you're right. But some of us haven't got so damn much worth remembering." He paused, finished without bitterness, "That's why we're here."

"Speak for yourself, Marsden," said a squat, swarthy man standing behind him. "I'm here to make money and quick!"

"I'm here because I love the sunshine," yelled another from the rear.

Some laughed, some didn't. All glanced at the fog which permitted visibility of no more than two hundred feet. Now and again it lifted to two thousand. Often it descended to ground level. Moisture condensed on their slickers and trickled down in little streams. The girl's black hair sparkled with diamonds of wetness.

"If you're not going to Annie's," continued Marsden, "somebody will have to put you up." A satirical sweep of his hand indicated her choice of six or seven hundred wooden shacks. "Take a look at what's on offer."

"No place for a *lady*," informed Bulstrode, trying to ingratiate himself and eyeing her like an elephant hoping for a bun.

"Thank you, but I knew what I was coming to. I was well-primed in advance." She smiled at them. "So I brought my own home with me."

Turning away she tripped light-footed toward the ship's tail and where cargo was piling up as the long-armed hoist swung to and from. Presently those on the ship dropped a ramp and rolled down it a small aluminium trainer with two wheels amidships.

"Oh, holy smoke," griped a snaggle-toothed onlooker, openly disappointed. "I'm the only one in this world with a pneumatic mattress—and what's it to her?"

"If they're going to start lugging them across homes and all," complained another, "it's the beginning of the end. This town will get too big for its boots before you know it."

"Which town?" asked a third, staring around and pretending to see nothing whatever.

Marsden caught her at her door three days later. He leaned on one of the hardwood posts somebody had driven in to show the limits of her property, let his calculating gaze rest on the trailer,

decided that what hung behind the facing window were the first lace curtains he'd seen in two or three years.

"Getting settled down?"

"Yes, thank you. I've been very busy. Unpacking and sorting things out takes quite a time."

"I suppose so. Nobody help you?"

"I didn't need any help."

"You may need it aplenty before you're through." He tilted his hat backward. "Anyone worried you yet?"

"Dear me, no. Why should they?"

"This is a man's town."

Looking as if she hadn't the vaguest notion of what he meant, she said: "Then why don't they give it a name?"

"It isn't enough of a place to deserve a name. Besides it's the only settlement on Venus. There isn't any other—yet. Anyway, names start arguments and arguments start fights."

"If they'll quarrel over the question of what to call this town it's evident that they haven't enough to do."

"When they feel like letting off steam they'll fight over anything. What else do you expect on the space-frontier?"

She did not answer.

"And they've plenty to do," he continued with a touch of harshness. "They're eating a mountain of white granite that runs niobium thirty pounds to the ton. It's useful for high tensils and stainless steels. Also, they're building a narrow-gauge railway eastward to a lake of pitchblende that makes a Geiger chatter like a machine-gun." He rubbed his lips with a thick forefinger. "Yes, they work hard, swear hard, drink hard and fight hard."

"There are things more worth fighting for."

"Such as what?"

"This town, for instance."

"A bunch of tumbledown shanties. A hell of a town!"

"It will be one someday."

"I can see it," Marsden registered a knowing grin. "Exactly as the boys would like it. Complete with city hall, police stations and high-walled jail. A lot of them came here to get away from all that. Do you know that at least forty per cent. of them have done time?"

"I don't see that it matters much."

"Don't you? Why not?" He was slightly surprised.

"Men who're really evil prefer to take things easy."

"Meaning —?"

"Those who've come *this* far must have done so to make a

fresh start with a clean sheet. They'd be stupid to mess up their lives a second time."

"Some people are made that way," he informed.

"And some make them that way," she retorted.

"Christ, a reformer!" He showed disgust. "What's your name?"

"Miranda Dean."

"It could be worse."

"What do you mean?"

"It could be Dolly Doberhorst."

"Who on earth is *she*?"

"An obese charmer at Annie's. Some men like 'em fat." He studied her figure. "And some don't."

"Really?" She seemed quite unconscious of his meaning or the appetite in his eyes. "Well, I'd better get on with my work. Pardon me, will you?"

"Sure."

He watched her enter the trailer, but did not continue on his way. He remained leaning on the post, picking his teeth with a thin stalk of grass and thinking that she'd be very much to his taste without her clothes. Clean and wholesome, not painted and gross like the others.

Staying there he exercised his masculine privilege of pondering possibilities until suddenly he became aware of a huge bulk at his side.

Bulstrode followed his gaze, growled: "What's the idea, staring at her place like you've a mind to bust in?"

"You wouldn't dream of it, of course?"

"No, I wouldn't. She's no faggot."

"Don't give me that! She's merely playing hard to get. Females are females. And you're a liar."

"That's enough for me," said Bulstrode, speaking low in his chest. "Take off that coat so I can get at your meat."

"Tough talk doesn't worry me, Muscle-bound." Marsden protruded a pocket significantly. "Because."

"Humph!" Bulstrode blinked, shuffled round to face him. "So you've got a gun. Like to know something?"

"What?"

"I just don't give a damn!"

With that he thrust out a hairy paw, arrested it halfway as Miranda Dean reappeared and came towards them. He lowered the paw, tried to hide it in the manner of a kid caught with a prohibited catapult. Marsden relaxed, took his hand from his pocket.

Coming up, she said brightly: "I thought maybe you boys would like to have these." Smiling at each in turn she bestowed a couple of little black books, returned to her trailer.

Marsden took one look at what he'd got and groaned, "Holy Moses, a prayer-book!"

"With hymns," confirmed Bulstrode on a note of sheer incredulity.

"A religious nut," said Marsden. "I knew she'd have a flaw somewhere. Nobody's perfect."

"Hymns," repeated Bulstrode with the air of one whose idol has revealed feet of clay. His beefy features registered confusion.

"Wait until Annie hears about this," Marsden went on. "She'll roll on the floor and bust her corsets."

"It's no bloody business of Annie's," asserted Bulstrode, feeling belligerent for no reason that he could understand.

Jerking a thumb toward the trailer, Marsden said: "It's going to be. Sooner or later she'll make it Annie's business. They get that way. I know—I've met 'em before. They can't leave well alone. They think their godgiven mission in life is to improve everything and everybody."

"Maybe some of us could do with it," Bulstrode suggested.

"Speak for yourself," Marsden looked him over. "A shave, a haircut and a bath and you'd rise to the subhuman level." His tones hardened. "But this is a free world. Why should you wash or shave if you don't want to?"

"It's honest dirt," said Bulstrode, giving him a retaliatory stare. "Soap and water can take it off—which is more than it could for your mind."

"Suffering saints, that holy tome must be working on you already! Sling it away before it takes hold."

He set the example by shying his own book into a bank of weeds. Bulstrode promptly retrieved it.

"If we don't want them we ought to give them back. They may have cost her money."

"All right," said Marsden, with malicious anticipation. "You go tell her to put them where the monkey put the nuts. I'll stay here and watch the fun."

"I'll keep them." Bulstrode crammed them into a hind pocket. "I'll give them to her some other time when I'm passing."

Marsden smiled to himself as he watched the other lumber away. Then he favoured the trailer with another speculative stare before he departed in the opposite direction.

The ship lifted in the late afternoon of the third day, groaned

high in the dank, everlasting fog and was gone toward the mother planet that no man on Venus could see. A sister ship was due in about six weeks' time and another two months after that. In the intervals those who remained were a primitive community vastly marooned beneath perpetual cloud.

Miranda went out for her first sight-seeing stroll that same evening. It was pleasant enough because the vapourous blanket came no lower with the night, the air was rich with oxygen which clung to the lower levels though absent in the upper strata. There were strong plant-odours and the area held comforting warmth.

Lights were beginning to show here and there amid the sprawl of many shacks; electric lights served by a small generating-station astride a rushing torrent three miles away. There was quite a blaze of illumination from one place midway along the rutted, straggling main street.

She walked slowly into the sluttish town that had no name, noting the rickety fence around somebody's clapboard, one-room abode and, outside another, the pathetic remnants of a tiny garden soon started and as soon abandoned. One Earth-rose still battled for life amid an unruly mob of Venusian growths trying to strangle the stranger from afar.

To her right a larger, three-roomed erection had a dilapidated shop front with a wire screen in lieu of precious glass, a few rusting hammers, saws, chisels, pliers and other oddments exhibited behind. A crudely lettered sign among the display read: *Haircut \$1.00. Beard Trimming 40c.* She wondered whether the sign ever brought in a customer.

Farther along she came to the extraordinarily well-lit building from which sounded fifty or more raucous voices and occasional bursts of song. It was a large edifice by local standards, built mostly of peeled logs and noteworthy for having real windows of real glass. Somebody must have paid a fancy price to import those transparent sheets.

A big board hung over the door and revealed neat, precise letters from which condensation dripped steadily.

ANNIE'S PLACE

Anna M. Jones, Prop.

A burly, rubber-booted man came along the street, paused outside the door, examined Miranda curiously. He was a complete stranger to her, and she to him.

"What's the matter, Sweetie? Annie gone bad on you?"

She eyed him in calm silence.

"Not deaf, are you?"

"No," she said.

"Then why don't you answer a civil question?"

"I didn't consider it civil."

"Oh, that's the way it is, eh?" He made a thin scowl. "One of those finicky tarts. Like to pick and choose." He shrugged broad, damp shoulders. "You'll change before you're through with this life."

"Don't we all?" she offered, sweetly.

"Not the way we want," he countered.

"The way God wants," she said.

"Jumping Jesus, don't give me *that* stuff!"

Sniffing his contempt he went inside. The noise from the place boosted and sank as the door opened and shut. A waft of air came out redolent of strong tobacco, strong booze and sweat.

A broken crate lay under one of the windows. Mounting it, Miranda raised herself on tiptoe, glanced inside. Not for long. Just for a brief moment, without approval or disapproval, but somewhat in the manner of a general studying the field of battle. It sufficed to show the expected setup of tables, chairs, bottles and six or eight blowsy women. And even a piano.

Thirty million miles. Every pound, every ounce had to be hauled a minimum of thirty million miles and often much more. So they didn't have this and they didn't have that—but they did have brewing facilities and a piano.

Well, she couldn't blame them for it. All work and no play adds up to a miserable existence. This was a man's world and men needed an outlet. Annie was supplying the demand. Annie was giving them light and laughter and girls to whom nothing was too hot or too heavy.

But sooner or later men would find they had other needs, if not today then tomorrow or the day after, or next month, or next year. It would be for Miranda rather than for Annie to help supply those.

This was a world in earliest pangs of birth. Science was the skilled midwife, but the fidgeting father was Ordinary Humanity. The world was destined to grow up no matter how reluctant to escape its easy-going, irresponsible childhood.

And it would grow up, become big and civilised, truly a world in its own right. The test of civilisation is its capacity for fulfilling individual needs, all needs, sober or sodden, sensible or crazy; the need for darkness or light, noise or silence, joy or tears, heaven or

hell, salvation or damnation. The adult world would have room for opposites of everything—including Annie and her ilk.

Hurriedly returning to her trailer Miranda extracted something from its small case, went back to Annie's place nursing the object in her hands. Except for the tinkling of the piano the building was silent as she neared. Then suddenly a chorus of hoarse, powerful voices roared into catchy song that shook the door and rattled the windows.

*Anna Maria, Anna Maria, Anna Maria Jones,
She's the queen of the tambourine, the banjo and the bones;
Rootitoot she plays the flute in a fascinating manner,
Pinkety-pong she runs along the keys of the grand pianner.
Rumpety-tum she bangs the drum with very superior tones,
Anna Maria, Anna Maria, Anna Maria Jones!*

They howled the last three words at the very tops of their voices, followed with much hammering on tables and stamping of feet. Then came an anticipatory quietness as they awaited a response from the subject of their song.

Outside the door Miranda promptly snatched the noiseless pause, stretched her little concertina, made it emit a drone of opening chords and commenced to sing in a high, sweet voice. The tune was fully as catchy, in fact it had somewhat of a boogie beat, but the words were different: something about Hallelujah, Christ the King.

Within the building a chair got knocked over, a glass was smashed. There sounded a mutter of many voices and several oaths. A crimson-faced, tousel-haired man jerked open the door and stared at Miranda.

"Jeez!" he said, blinking. "Jeez!"

Several more joined the dumbfounded onlooker, pressing around him or peering over his shoulders. They were too petrified with amazement to think up suitable remarks. Eventually they parted to make way for one of Annie's girls, a buxom woman with hennaed hair and a revealing frock.

Crinkling heavily pencilled brows at the singer, the woman said in hard, metallic tones, "Beat it, you silly bitch!"

"Haw-haw!" chortled the tousel-haired man, willing to extract the most from this diversion. "What's the matter, Ivy? You afraid of competition?"

"From *that*?" Ivy emitted a loud sniff. "Don't talk crazy!"

"Oh, I don't know," he mused, slyly baiting her, "Annie could use a young and slender one, just for a pleasant change."

"Not a goddam hymn-howler, she couldn't," contradicted Ivy with much positiveness. "And neither could you. Get wise to

yourself. You's no scented Adonis."

"Off your knees, Slade," advised one of the others, trying to add fuel to the flames. "Ivy is counting you out."

"Wouldn't be the first time," grinned Slade, giving Ivy a you-know-what-I-mean look.

"Shut up!" snapped Ivy, irritably. She glared at Miranda. "Are you going to quit yawping or not?"

Miranda sang on, oblivious to everything.

Exhibiting a fat fist ornamented with six rings in which zircons did duty as diamonds, Ivy rasped, "Shuffle off before I hammer you in the teeth. I'm not telling you again."

Adding a couple more decibels to the volume, Miranda poured her hymn through the open door.

Ivy's ample bosom heaved, her face flushed, her eyes glinted.

"All right, Misery, you've asked for it. If men can't handle you, I can!"

So saying she stepped forward intent on mayhem. Slade grabbed and got her big arm, his gnawed fingers sinking into puffy flesh.

"Now, now, Ivy, take it easy."

She spoke to him as one would to a dog. "Let go of me."

Miranda blithely continued to sing. For good measure she let go a couple of hot licks with the concertina.

"Take your paw off my arm, you smelly tramp!" bawled Ivy, crimson with fury.

"Be a lady," suggested Slade, hanging on to her. "Just for once."

That did it. Ivy's rage switched its aim forthwith.

"What d'you mean, just for once?" Swinging her free arm she walloped him over the ear. The blow was designed to knock his head off, but he saw it coming and rocked with it.

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed a bearded onlooker, holding his belly.

"Come take the keys to the kingdom," trilled Miranda. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

Still employing her unhampered arm, Ivy smacked the bearded laughter clean in the whiskers. He sat down hard, chortled fit to choke. Several more cackled with him. Ivy hauled furiously against Slade's grip, voicing vitriolic imprecations.

"Ivy!" called a sharp, authoritative voice from somewhere inside.

"Look, Annie," hollered Ivy, "there's a dizzy dame out here and —"



"What's it to me?" inquired the voice, with a touch of acid. "For the love of Mike come in and shut that door—the fresh air is killing us."

Bellows of laughter greeted that sally. Ivy forced herself to simmer down sufficiently to obey, throwing Miranda a look of sudden death before she went inside. The others followed. The door closed with a contemptuous bang.

Miranda ended her singing, commenced addressing a speech to thin air. After four minutes of this an old frontiersman came creakily along the street, paused to look her over, stopped to listen. A bit later he removed his hat and held it in one hand. He was a scrawny specimen with clear blue eyes set in a face resembling an aged and badly wrinkled apple. For reasons best known to himself he did not think it at all strange that a person should sermonize a non-existent congregation.

In fact when she had finished he wheezed an underbreath "Amen!" watched her pick up her concertina and set off home. He remained there quite a time after she had gone, then slowly planted his hat on his head and mooched on his way.

From that time onward Miranda's singing became a regular evening performance. Sometimes she made her stand at one end of the bedraggled main street, sometimes at the other, and every now and again it was squarely in front of Annie's place.

The oldster gradually made it a habit to provide her with an audience of one, standing not too near, not too far off, watching her with bright blue eyes and never uttering a word other than the final "Amen!" It wasn't inborn piety coming out in later years; it wasn't sympathy with the spirit of rebellion; it wasn't his one-word protest against things that are as distinct from things that ought to be. It was then no more than the desire to cheer on a little dog fighting a big one.

Passers-by treated Miranda in three different ways. Some stared blankly ahead and refused to acknowledge her existence. Some threw her the brief, pitying glance one bestows on a village imbecile. The majority grinned and made her the butt of coarse witticisms always malicious and often cruel, opining that religious mania was the result of chronic virginity. She never changed colour, never winced, never permitted a barb to sink home.

Once in a while the latter type had a go at heckling her speeches, taunting her with unseemly parodies, filling in her pauses with bawdy cracks or giving her the mock-support of mock-piety.

Her one loyal listener resented these tactics but held his peace and remained content to pose nearby, hat in hand.

One night a burly, blue-jowled drunk dreamed up the ultimate insult. He stood on the boardwalk swaying and blearing all through the sermon, wiping glazed, out-of-focus eyes with the back of a hairy hand and belching loudly every time she ended a sentence. Then, when she had finished, he turned to the oldster and ostentatiously tossed a coin into his hat. With a violent hiccup and an airy wave of his hand he staggered into Annie's place followed by three or four appreciative witnesses.

Gazing angrily into his hat, his blue eyes burning, the old frontiersman said: "See that? The boozey bum flung us a credit. What'll I do with it?"

"Give it to me," suggested Miranda, extending an eager palm.

He passed it over like one in a dream, gulped and said, "Mean to say you'll actually take money from a no-good sot?"

"I would take it from the Devil himself." She stashed the coin in a pocket. "We can use it for God's work."

"We?" He misunderstood her use of the plural, thought it over, eventually mumbled, "Maybe you're right. Money's money, no matter how you get it." Then he had another long think, screwing up his wizened features while he wrestled with a personal problem. Reaching a decision, he moved across, stood beside her shoulder to shoulder and held out his hat invitingly.

"Would you care to sing with me?" she asked, squeezing an opening chord.

"No, ma'am. I've got a hell of a voice. Let me be just as I am."

"All right." She closed her eyes, opened her mouth and jazzed up a fast one about marching, marching till we come to the Golden Gates.

Ten minutes later a hurrying, self-conscious man threw another credit into the hat, cast a scared glance around and beat it from the scene of the crime.

She had been on Venus exactly eight weeks. Another ship had come and gone. By now the community glumly accepted that it had a harmless nuthead in its midst.

Digging the little plot outside her trailer early one day, she paused to rest, rubbed the blistered palm of her right hand, glanced up and found a plump, frowsy-looking girl surveying her speculatively.

"Good morning!" greeted Miranda, smiling.

"Morning," responded the other shortly and after some hesitation.

"It's nice to see another woman," Miranda went on. "There are so few of us and so many men around."

"Don't I know it!" gave back the plump girl, with subtle meaning. She looked up and down the street, eyed the trailer, seemed undecided whether or not to linger.

"Would you care to come inside?" Miranda invited. "There is coffee and cakes and I'm starving for a gossip and —"

"I'm Dolly," chipped in the other with an air of begging pardon for a skunk in her handbag.

"How nice! My name is Miranda." Dumping the spade, she went to the trailer, opened its door.

"I work at Annie's," announced Dolly, making no move.

"That must be awfully interesting. I'd love you to tell me all about it."

Registering a fat scowl, Dolly demanded, "Are you making fun of me?"

"Good gracious, no!"

"They make plenty of you."

"I'm used to it."

"I'm not," said Dolly. She had another look up the street. "Hell of a place," she added.

"If you'd like to come in, please do."

"I guess I will." She advanced as if breasting an invisible tide. "I've gone past caring, see?" She entered, flopped on to a pneumatic seat, studied her surroundings. "Nice little joint you've got here."

"Thank you. I'm so glad you like it." Pumping her paraffin stove, Miranda lit it, adjusted the flame.

"Better than my flea-trap. Everyone says you're cracked. H'm, it looks like it! This holy biz must pay off."

"It does."

"So I see," said Dolly with a touch of malice. Her eyes narrowed. "Where's the catch?"

Miranda paused, coffee percolator in hand. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Nobody makes a red cent without surrendering their heart's blood for it one way or another," informed Dolly. "You've got to give in order to receive. What's your sacrifice?"

"Nothing much. Only my life, such as it is." Capping the percolator, Miranda placed it on the stove, asked with deceptively

casual interest, "What do *you* give?"

"Shut up!" snapped Dolly, savagely. She rocked to and fro, nursing her handbag on her lap and staring down at her big knees. She did this for a long time, then without warning harshed, "I'm damn sick of it!" and burst into tears.

Taking no notice, Miranda continued with various tasks in her little kitchen and left the visitor to howl it out. Dolly shook and sobbed, feeling blindly for a handkerchief. Finally she stood up, tear-stained and embarrassed.

"I'd better be going."

"Oh, not now, surely? The coffee is about ready."

"I've made a fool of myself."

"Nonsense. A woman is entitled to a good cry now and then." Miranda took little cakes from a cupboard, arranged them on a plate. "Makes one feel better sometimes."

"How the heck do you know?" Dolly sat down again, dabbed the corners of her eyes, stared at the cakes. "Bet you've never bawled bloody murder."

"I did the day my father died."

"Oh!" She swallowed hard, studied thick, unmanicured fingers, said after a long pause, "I don't remember my old man."

"How sad!" Miranda poured the coffee.

"And not so much of my mother either," continued Dolly, morbidly reminiscent. "I ran away from her when I was sixteen. She didn't think I'd do well on the stage. But I knew better, see?"

"I see."

"So I pranced around in the chorus line of a fourth-rate company and that's as far as I ever got. The years rolled past, I couldn't keep my hips down and I got shoved toward the breadline by younger kids as daft as I had been. So . . . so . . . a girl has to do *something*, hasn't she?"

"Most certainly," agreed Miranda. "Will you try one of these cakes? I made them myself last night."

"Thanks." Dolly took a large bite, choked with emotion, blew her nose and went on, "I went the way of all flesh, if you know what I mean. I got pawed around and kicked about something awful, but at least I ate. Thank God my mother never heard of it. She'd have died of shame."

Miranda made no comment.

"I finished up here with Annie. Sort of wanted to get away from everything over there." Dolly used her piece of cake to gesture more or less Earthward. "Now I'd go back on the next ship if there was anything to go back to. But there isn't. Not for me. I picked

this lousy dump and I'm stuck with it for keeps."

"Well, there's plenty for a woman to do here," opined Miranda, sipping coffee.

"You're dead right there is—and I'm fed up doing it. What else is there?"

"This town will need hundreds more things as time goes on. In fact it can't grow without them."

"Such as what?" Dolly persisted, sceptically.

"A little laundry would be a good thing for a start."

"A laundry?" Dolly was reluctant to believe her ears. "The few girls do their own washing. The men don't wash at all. Who the blazes wants a laundry?"

"The men," said Miranda. "Obviously."

"Who'd run it?" challenged Dolly, changing angle of attack.

"We two."

She dropped her piece of cake, fumbled around for it, retrieved it and stared wide-eyed at Miranda.

"Mean to say you really think I'd set to and scrub clothes for a living?" She gave an unconvincing sniff. "I wouldn't sink so low!"

"I would."

"Then why don't you?"

"I'm going to," Miranda pointed to a couple of packing cases looming outside the window. "One tent and one washing machine. All I need is power. They're fixing me up with an electricity supply tomorrow."

"You've got a nerve!" said Dolly. "Christ, you've got a nerve."

"Haven't *you*?"

Standing up, Dolly prowled restlessly around the small space, gazed a couple of times at the packing cases, scowled to herself, mooched to and fro. After a while she said, "Don't tempt me."

"Why not?"

"Annie would throw me out. Either I work for her or I don't. I'd have no place to sleep."

"This is a two-berth trailer."

Dolly chewed her bottom lip, said in stifled tones, "You don't *need* a haybag like me."

"Everyone is needed by someone," said Miranda, gently. "Everyone."

"You're just saying that."

"Don't you believe me?"

"I'd like to. It isn't easy."

"It should be," Miranda mused. "I've never had difficulty in

believing the things I wish to believe."

Ignoring that remark, Dolly again ambled around the tiny floor-space. After a bit she said "By God! By God!"

"Besides," added Miranda, "we'd be helped."

"Oh, yes? By whom?"

"By God."

Dolly flinched and snapped back, "We'll need it!"

"All that's required of us is courage. One can still have that when one has nothing else."

"You're the kind who can talk your way into anything and talk your way out of it again," said Dolly. She reached a reluctant decision, shrugged her plump shoulders. "Maybe you're touched in the head and maybe I'm a bit that way too. Anyway, you've got company. If you can get away with it why shouldn't I?"

"Like another coffee?" Miranda reached for the cup.

They were having a hopeless struggle with the tent next mid-morning when Bulstrode came along, joined the fray, pitted his brute strength against unruly canvas. Between the three of them they got it erected, pegged its stays, fixed it good and tight.

"Anything else?" inquired Bulstrode, brushing his hands.

"I hardly like to trouble you," said Miranda, her gaze straying toward the other crate.

"Think nothing of it," he assured, secretly surprised to find himself enjoying this spell of gallantry. It lent him a special air of proprietorship. He broke the crate open, lugged the machine into the tent, looked it over, asked, "What's the use of this gadget without juice?"

"We're having current laid on today and water tonight," Miranda explained. "Tomorrow this will be the M and D Laundry."

"The whatta?"

"The Miranda and Dolly Laundry."

"I've been wondering what the deuce you were doing here," said Bulstrode, giving Dolly the incredulous once-over. "Don't tell me *you're* in this?"

"Any objections, Hamface?" demanded Dolly, belligerently.

"No business of mine," he said, backing away fast.

"Thank you *so* much," put in Miranda. "We could never have managed without your help."

"It's a pleasure." He glowered around in search of witnesses, truculently ready to prove his hardness to any who might accuse him of getting soft. There were none in sight. He lumbered away and

they heard him growl underbreath as he went, "A laundry— holy mackerel!"

Staring after the burly figure, Dolly said wonderingly, "What made that muscle-bound bum pitch in?"

"We needed him," said Miranda.

Dolly stewed it over awhile, responded quietly, "I'm beginning to think you've got something."

"Do you feel it strongly enough to come out with me this evening?"

"Out with you?" She registered puzzlement followed by sudden uneasiness. "Singing in the street?"

"Yes,"

"Nothing doing!" Dolly flapped agitated hands. "Don't ask me *that*! I've given Annie the brush-off and come in with you on this loony stunt but don't ask me *that*!"

"What's wrong with it?"

"There's nothing *wrong*, I suppose," admitted Dolly, her alarm increasing by leaps and bounds. "It's not the sort of thing I care to do."

"Afraid they'll laugh at you?"

"And how! They'll bellow till their buttons fly off."

"They don't do that to me," mentioned Miranda.

"That's because . . . because . . ."

"Because what?"

"You've been around quite a few weeks. They know you're touched in the head and they're fed up making the most of it. A joke wears thin by the hundredth time. They've come to the point of accepting you as you are."

"That's true, Dolly. It always happens if you're sufficiently determined, if you stick it out long enough. And it can happen with you too."

"I'm in no mood to try." Her voice went up a couple of notes. "I've been the plaything of boozey apes too long to want to become the target of their cheap sneers now. Don't shove me further than I want to go. Enough is enough."

"All right. You won't mind me leaving you by yourself a piece?"

"Why should I? Nothing can happen to me that hasn't already happened fifty times. Besides, I'm not a kid. You go do your holy serenading. I'll tidy the place and have supper ready for when you get back."

"Thank you. It will be nice to return to someone." She paused, added with sincerity, "I'm glad to have you with me. I'm really

glad."

"Oh, cut it out!" said Dolly embarrassed.

And so that evening one remained in the trailer and absorbed the long-forgotten atmosphere of a home while the other took the concertina into town.

The wrinkled oldster was waiting for Miranda as now he invariably did. By this time she had learned his name: James Hanbury. But that was all she knew of him.

"Good evening, Jimmy," she greeted.

"Good evening, Miss Dean," he responded, solemnly.

Then he stood beside her at the kerb and held out his tattered hat while she began to sing. The collection amounted to one credit, two quarter-credits and a worthless brass slug.

There sounded an imperative knock at the trailer door in the mid-afternoon of next day. Answering, Miranda found a tall, stately woman waiting outside. The visitor appeared to be in her late fifties, with white, regal-looking hair and intelligent but arrogant features.

"How do you do?" said Miranda, a trifle primly.

"That depends upon whom I do," answered the other in hard, cynical tones. She gave Miranda a careful examination with dark gray eyes that had seen more than enough. "May I come in?"

"By all means."

"Thank you!"

Entering, the visitor glanced around with begrudging approval, announced, "Doubtless you have heard of me. I am Annie," Her cultured tones gained a touch of acid as she followed it up with, "Once known as Anytime Annie. But that was long ago."

"How interesting," said Miranda. "Please do sit down."

"I prefer to stand." Again she examined the trailer. "H'm! Quite domesticated. Where is Dolly?"

"Outside working in the tent."

"So she really *is* here," said Annie in the manner of one confirming an incredible rumour. "Why has she left me?"

"She's ambitious."

"A clever answer," conceded Annie. "I admire you for it."

"Thank you so much."

"In which direction do her ambitions lie?"

"We are starting a laundry,"

"A laundry?" Annie's well-plucked eyebrows lifted a fraction.

"Do you think you're a couple of Chinks?"

"Do we look it?"

"Dolly is and always has been too stupid to know what's good for her," went on Annie, evading the point.

"But you are much wiser?"

"I ought to be, my dear. Much as I hate to admit it, I am old enough to be her mother. I have been around quite a spell. One learns things through the passing years."

"I should hope so," gave back Miranda, fervently. "It must be rather awful to learn them all too late."

Annie winced, recovered. "You have a swift tongue." She waved a hand to indicate the surroundings. "I think *you* could do better for yourself than *this*."

"I am quite happy."

"Of course you are. You have youth on your side. The days of disillusionment have yet to come. But they will, they will!"

"I doubt it," observed Miranda. "I'm in a different line of business from you. And I find it rather satisfying."

"Clothes washing and hymn singing," scoffed Annie, expressing a wealth of contempt. "Any incurable cretin can do either." She brushed the subject aside. "But I've not come here to indulge in profitless argument. All I want is a word with Dolly."

"Very well." Sliding a window sideways, Miranda called toward the tent. "Dolly! Dolly!"

In short time Dolly came along, scowled at the sight of who was waiting for her, demanded, "What do you want?"

"You!" informed Annie, succinctly. "It's hard enough to get girls all the way here without them going temperamental on me afterward. So collect your scattered wits and come back where you belong."

"You can go to hell," advised Dolly.

"Someday I shall—according to those peculiarly well-informed." Annie shot a side-glance at Miranda. "But the time is not yet. Meanwhile you will continue to work for me."

"I'm not your slave. Why should I?"

"Because I picked you out of the gutter and that's where you're heading back right now!"

"That is a statement of opinion rather than of fact," Miranda put in.

"I'll thank you to keep out of this," Annie retorted. "You have meddled enough." She switched attention to Dolly again. "Well, are you going to see reason or not?"

"I don't want to go back."

"You will, in your own good time—and then I won't take you."

Not at any price." Her calculating gaze went over the other as she added, "Opportunity is knocking for the last time. You can grab it or go stew in your own juice."

"I'll stew."

"Very well. I am sorry for you—but not one-tenth as sorry as you'll be for yourself someday." Turning toward the door, she said to Miranda with exaggerated courtesy, "Thank you for having me in."

"You're most welcome," assured Miranda. "*Anytime.*"

"So kind of you," said Annie, refusing to twitch. Outside she finished, "I know your kind. I've met them before. You'll keep on squalling until you get all the dopes behind you." Her smile was a meaningful warning. "But you'll never get me!"

With that she departed. Miranda came back, sat down, stared at the subdued Dolly.

"What a strange person. I didn't imagine her like that."

"Like what?" asked Dolly, disinterestedly.

"She's rather ladylike."

"A vaudeville artist busted on the boards," explained Dolly. "A theatrical floppo. She rose higher than I did, fell farther and landed harder. Still got the grand manner. Still thinks she's somebody. It's one of the things I hate her for: always acting so clever, so superior."

"One must learn not to hate."

"Why?"

"Because people are as life has made them."

"You can't alter people," declared Dolly, flatly.

"You can change life," said Miranda. "Why, you have just changed yours!"

At the end of another six months the laundry was functioning regularly, at a modest profit and had a small but growing list of customers who were discovering that a shave and haircut goes well with a clean shirt.

The tent had been replaced by a peeled log cabin built by Bulstrode and a dozen cronies who concealed their inward pleasure beneath a stream of blasphemy. The aged Jimmy had appointed himself general handyman and Bulstrode had developed the habit of dropping in from time to time.

Most of all important, the community had now accepted the situation as one unalterable either by opposition or pointed criticism. Indeed, it was impossible to think up adequate reason for opposing.

In everyone's eyes Dolly had become established as a genuine laundress. It was understood by one and all that Jimmy had some sort of stake in the business and that the bearlike Bulstrode had made himself its unofficial protector.

The days of ridicule and venom had drifted by like fragments of an evil dream. The subject was exhausted of its humour and there was nothing derogatory left to be said. Sheer persistence had converted the formerly odd into a present-day convention; all that once had been resented was now taken for granted and recognised as part of the Venusian scene.

Sheer persistence!

Subconsciously sensing the social atmosphere, Dolly found it required no redoubtable effort of will to go out with Miranda one evening.- Taking a tambourine from a box in the trailer she was satisfied at first merely to beat time with the signing, but after four nights her courage suddenly welled up. She joined in with a bellowing but not unpleasant contralto and the town accepted without comment that now there were two voices instead of one crying in the Venusian wilderness. Jimmy still remained silent, content to hold the hat and lend the moral support of his presence.

But they were three. A daft tart, an aged washout and a onetime whore.

More ships had solidified out of the everlasting mist and gone back into it, the last bringing a couple of families complete with kids. Swiftly erected shacks lengthened the main street by half a mile and there was half-hearted, perfunctory talk of throwing up a ramshackle school for the moppets. The nameless town was growing slowly but surely, creeping towards its destiny of a someday city.

One morning Miranda left the laundry in the others' care, picked her way across four miles of rubble-strewn ground and reached the niobium extraction plant. It was a big, dirty place where hammer-mills set up a deafening clatter and grinders roared without cease; a place full of big-chested men smeared with thin mud formed of granite-dust and moisture. Finding the office, she handed in her card.

Somebody conducted her to an inner room where a wide-shouldered man with dark hair and a fuzzy moustache stood up behind his desk, card in hand. A second man, red-haired and lean-faced, posed nearby and studied the visitor with frank curiosity.

"Please be seated," said the moustached one, indicating a chair. "My name is Langtree." He gestured toward his companion.

"This is Mr. McLeish."

"So glad to know you," responded Miranda.

Waiting for her to settle, Langtree resumed his own chair, had another look at the card. "Now what can we do for you . . . er . . . Lieutenant?"

McLeish gave a start of surprise, bent forward to have a look at the card.

"I understand that this company registers title to land," said Miranda.

"In that respect we are temporarily functioning on behalf of the Terran Government," Langtree told her. "Copies of claims are forwarded to Earth and are not effective until approved and recorded there. We have no real legislative status of our own. We are merely deputed to act until such time as this place can support a few bureaucrats."

"All the same, you can assign unclaimed land?"

"Providing that it has no known mineral deposits," he conceded. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Yes, Mr. Langtree. There's a nice, large vacant lot right in the middle of the main street. I can't imagine why nobody has taken it. But if it's unclaimed I want it."

He gave a rueful smile. "That particular piece of estate was reserved for this company's headquarters whenever we got around to some real, solid building."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Don't let it worry you. We have changed our minds. It is most unlikely that we'll use it."

"Why not?" Her oval face became hopeful.

"Originally we supposed that the town would remain where it is right now and that we had grabbed ourselves a good central position. Now it's evident that things won't work out that way. Geologists have found rich supplies of pitchblends in the east, a railroad will be constructed to reach them and the town's natural tendency will be to grow along the tracks." He pondered a moment, said, "You realise what that means?"

"What does it mean?"

"If this place ever becomes big—which I think it will—and if it has a slummy area—which, unfortunately it may—the plot you want will be smack among the shacks and ashpiles. It'll be in a quarter anything but salubrious."

"So much the better."

He frowned at that, went on, "Moreover, it's directly opposite Annie's dump where all the rowdies tend to congregate."

"So much the better," she repeated.

"Have you ever lived in a big city?" put in McLeish.

"Yes."

"In parts that aren't nice?"

"Nowhere else."

"And did you *like* it?" he persisted.

"Of course. It was most convenient for me because my work lay right outside the door."

"Oh!" He subsided in defeat.

Langtree harumphed, pulled at his moustache, asked, "For what purpose do you require this land, Lieutenant?"

"For a place of worship—eventually."

"That's what I thought." He played the moustache again.

"You put me in a poor position to refuse."

"Do you wish to refuse?" she inquired, open-eyed.

"Not exactly." He sought around for a method of expressing himself, carried on, "Naturally we approve your plan. In fact we endorse it most heartily. But we deplore the timing."

"Why?"

"Well, you've established yourself in a small community and so far you've got by. But don't let it fool you. It's going to be a lot tougher before it becomes easier."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it. In the time since the first ship made its land-fall we've had eighteen murders and forty or more attempted ones. Not to mention other crimes. That's nothing, nothing at all. A lot of labour pains have yet to come before we build anything resembling a city."

He paused for a comment from her but got none.

"Immediately the railroad is completed we'll have four ship-loads of roughnecks here to run the mines. Yesterday we received prospectors' reports on silver and osmiridium in the north and that will entice more hard characters." He studied her thoughtfully, then assured, "You haven't seen anything yet!"

"Neither has this town," she gave back, smiling.

"I don't doubt that," he agreed. "And I don't doubt that you intend to show it plenty. But I'd feel a lot happier if you'd let things rest until at least we've reached the dignity of having a small police force."

"Wouldn't it be much nicer never to need one?" she asked.

Throwing up both hands in mock despair, Langtree said, "I should know better than to argue with a lady."

"Then I may have this piece of land?" She leaned forward,

her expression eager.

"You're hamstrung, pinned down and shackled," said McLeish, grinning at Langtree. "You might as well quit."

"I give in." Langtree heaved a sigh of resignation. "Go fetch the papers."

When they had been brought he went carefully through them, filled them in triplicate, showed her where to sign, gave her a copy. She departed, grateful and bright-eyed. Langtree flopped back in his seat and gazed absently at the wall.

After a while he said, "I guess it was inevitable. It had to come sooner or later."

"Think so?"

"Yes! Ever noticed how big cities got boosted out of the dirt?"

"Sure," said McLeish. "They're raised by a horde of steel-erectors, bricklayers, masons and hodcarriers bossed by guys holding blueprints."

"And by the long sustained pressure of a thousand and one determined little groups," declared Langtree with emphasis. "The Quakers forced Philadelphia out of the earth. The Mormons raised Salt Lake City from the desert. Earth is spattered with New Jerusalems built by pernickety dissenters and various gangs of one-track-minders. Stands to sense the same things will go on wherever humanity goes."

"Maybe you're right," admitted McLeish.

"I remember when they concocted that new rocket-fuel they said space was ours. It wasn't. They had to spend years designing combustion-chambers that would hold the pressures. So now we're squirted across the heavens under high pressure. And that's still not enough. We've got to settle and exploit and build under psychological thrusts that can't and won't be held."

He brooded awhile, continued, "Sooner or later a guy with a bee in his bonnet will try prevent all building in a certain square mile because he thinks it ought to be a city park. He'll get like-minders behind him. They'll bellow, bawl and agitate until the area is protected and finally becomes a park. Another mob will compel booze saloons to recognise the law of moderation in all things. Another will push and shove and play merry hell until we've a hospital and a maternity home before we can afford either. Long sustained pressure; it gets there in the end."

"It isn't easy to beat them down," McLeish conceded.

"It can be well-nigh impossible," asserted Langtree. "The little groups provide a development-factor that objective scientists

rarely take into account. They can bring about the cumulative effect of a large bomb, but slowly." He thought again, added, "When I was a kid a creeper thrust a thin tendril through a minute crack in the garden wall. My old man wanted to cut it but Mom wouldn't let him. Sixteen years later that wall was busted. It cost my old man fifty credits for new brickwork."

"That girl is different," said McLeish. "She's a human being, She'd have to push until she grew old."

"I've seen them do that, too." Langtree threw a glance at the other. "Would *you*?"

"Not on your life!"

"She would. And probably she will."

"It's a shame," opined McLeish for no logical reason. "But maybe it's a good thing for this world or any other."

"This world or any other *needs* a few good things," said Langtree.

The vacant lot still remained a vacant lot at the end of another year. Some fine day when enough hands, money and material were available it would hold a stone-built, glass-windowed flophouse that would also be a house of God. At times it seemed as if such a culmination was an impossibly long way off, that the temporarily homeless would have no place to sleep, the spiritually hungry no place to pray. But the lot was held because everything comes to those who wait.

At the laundry there were now three washing machines and Jimmy had become an energetic, fulltime worker therein. Bulstrode was a frequent visitor with the frequency increasing as weeks rolled by. Once or twice the big man had been horrified by a secret desire to turn the street parading trio into a quartet. He had stepped upon it firmly, crushing it down.

His strength was his weakness in that he doubted his ability to counter a crude insult with anything less than a broken nose. And from occasional remarks let slip by Miranda he'd gathered that nose-breaking was out, most definitely out. That made it awfully hard on a powerful man with furry arms. It meant he would have to answer blood-heating jibes with a mere smile when it would be less trouble and infinitely more satisfying to crack a neck.

Such was the situation when the sixteenth ship came out of the eternal mist beyond which gleamed a host of stars including a great green one named Terra. The ship unloaded a little aluminium trailer the exact copy of Miranda's. An elderly couple, grey-haired

and wise-eyed arrived with it, positioned it next door, had a few small crates dumped alongside.

They held a sedate celebration in the log laundry that afternoon. The newcomers greeted Miranda in the manner of oldtime friends, were introduced as Major and Captain Bennett. Miranda handed around pie, coffee and cakes, her face flushed and eyes alight with the pleasure of meeting.

Bulstrode eventually wandered outside, stood staring at the crates much as a child looks at birthday parcels. In short time Major Bennett joined him.

"More washing contraptions?" Bulstrode asked.

"Dear me, no. Three should be adequate for a while." He examined the nearer pair of boxes. "These are musical instruments."

"Huh?" Bulstrode's eyes gained a sudden gleam. "Want them emptying out?"

"There's no hurry. I'm sure we can manage."

"I *like* busting crates. Maybe I'm still a kid at heart."

"Then we may as well deal with them," said Major Bennett. "It will have to be done sometime."

Finding a case-lever, he started prying up slats with the slow carefulness of the aged. Bulstrode hooked big, hard fingertips under the lid of another, bulged his arms and drew it up with nails squeaking. He peeped inside.

"Suffering cats!" he whispered.

"What's the matter?"

"A drum." He voiced it in low, reverent tones, like one uttering a holy name. Sliding trembling hands into the box he fondled the contents. "As I live and breathe, a big bass drum!"

"Surely there's nothing remarkable about that?" said Bennett, mystified.

With a faraway look in his eyes, Bulstrode said, "For ten years I carried the drum in the hometown band."

"You did?"

"Yes, tiger-skin and all. It was a darned fine band."

Lowering his arms into the crate Bulstrode gently drew forth the drum. He made another dip, brought out a air of fat-knobbed sticks and a broad leather sling complete with chest and belly hooks. Slowly, like on in a dream, he donned the sling, fastened the drum upon his big chest, looped the sticks to his wrists.

For a moment he posed there like a statue dreaming wistfully of days long gone by. Then something took possession of him. Fire leaped in his eyes. He twirled the drumsticks into twin discs

of light, spun them sidewise, above, inward, outward and across, flashing hither and thither and flicking the taut vellum with expert beat.

Boom-boom, bop-bop-boom went the big bass drum.

Drawn by the sound the others came out of the laundry and watched fascinated while the great drum sounded and the drumsticks whirled. Finally he stopped.

"By hokey!" he said, flush-faced.

Without comment Major Bennet extracted a silver cornet from a case, handed it to his wife. Next he produced a trombone, fitted it together, checked its slide-action with a tentative toot. He eyed Bulstrode shrewdly.

"By hokey!" repeated that individual. "It takes me back years!" He looked around in a kind of semi-daze, noticed Miranda socketing together a pole bearing a large flag. "Years!" he said.

Still watching him, Bennett made no comment. He had the air of an experienced cook who knows exactly when the joint will be done to perfection.

"This town could do with a band," asserted Bulstrode. He eyed the trombone.

"We have nobody to play the flute, the oboe and the tuba," said Bennett, quietly. "Nobody to beat the drum. Someday we'll find them among those able to kneel and pray, able to fight for the things they believe to be right."

Unhooking the drum and discarding the sling, Bulstrode carefully placed them on the ground. He wetted his lips, fidgeted a bit, stared at the sky.

"I'd better be going," he announced. Starting to back away, he met Miranda's eyes, found his feet strangely frozen to the earth.

"Goodbye!" encouraged Dolly in a manner he did not like.

A slight perspiration broke out on his forehead. His thick lips worked around and no words came out. He was in psychic agony, like a man paralysed by sheer need to run.

Putting down the trombone, Major Bennett took him by the elbow, led him into the trailer and out of the others' sight.

"Let us speak to God," he said simply, and sank upon his knees.

After considerable hesitation, Bulstrode knelt beside him, first making sure the door was shut and the windows obscured. Bennett put an arm across his shoulders, holding him while they spoke to God because that is the fashion of their kind. Other pressure-groups, other rigmaroles. This was theirs: to share what they wished to say side by side, shoulder to shoulder, before the Supreme Commander.

When they came out, soldiers both, Miranda had opened another box containing hats but no uniforms; peaked caps and poke bonnets ornamented with red-lettered ribbons. Self-consciously fitting on a cap, Bulstrode strove to divert attention from himself by admiring Dolly in her new bonnet.

"My, you look good in that," he said.

"Don't pick on me," she snapped.

"I mean it. You look kind of . . . uh . . . nice."

"I'm fat and I know it."

"Plumpish," he corrected. "The way you ought to be."

"Don't give me that stuff. You know what I've been and so does everyone else."

"You aren't the same person."

"Yes I am." Her tones faltered.

"You know you're not—and so does everyone else," he cracked back.

"Go take a walk, you big, clumsy lug!" With that, Dolly pulled out a handkerchief and started to snivel.

"Jeepers!" exclaimed Bulstrode, taken aback, "I didn't mean to —"

He stopped as Miranda pulled his sleeve and explained, "A woman can weep when she's happy."

"That so?" He crinkled bushy brows at her, mildly dumbfounded. "Mean to say she's enjoying herself?"

Dolly sobbed louder to confirm it.

"Good grief!" said Bulstrode, quite unconscious of the pun. He studied Dolly in frank amazement until eventually she composed herself, wiped her eyes, managed a self-conscious smile.

Then he took up the drum in the manner of one claiming his own after countless years. He hooked it onto his chest, stood holding it with proud possession. He twirled the sticks, again delighting in the feel of them.

"Christ Jesus," he said, without blasphemy, "this town's going to take an awful licking!" A thought struck him and he hopefully asked Miranda, "How soon are we going to give it 'em hot and strong?"

She didn't answer. She seemed to be waiting for something. They all stood there in caps and poke bonnets, watching him and waiting for something. Momentarily it puzzled him, that and the electric suspense in the air. For whom or what were they waiting? Was there any good reason to wait at all?

It entered his mind that the big drum takes the lead and sets the pace.

Always.

Involuntarily his fingers tightened around the sticks, his leg muscles stiffened in readiness, his chest swelled, his eyes flashed and what was within him came out as a triumphant shout.

"Now!"

It galvanised them into activity. Human pressure was on the boost. Old Jimmy donned the pole-sling, braced the flag in his grip. The others closed the trailer, collected their instruments, formed in two ranks of three each.

For a few seconds they stood to attention like troops on parade. The pale, fog-ridden Venusian light sparkled on cornet and concertina, trombone and tambourine, while the big drum poised and the great flag flew fast and free.

Then Bulstrode swung a stick and sounded one loud, imperative note.

Boom!

In exact step both ranks started off upon the left foot, and advanced with military precision upon the waiting town.

Glory! Glory!

The Salvation Army was marching into battle for the Lord.

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

THE NEXT ISSUE

Have you ever thought what a difficult job it is going to be to educate a semi-intelligent robot? And further, what a catastrophe might occur if some fact, however small individually, was to be overlooked?

This is the absorbing central theme of an original story by popular new-author DAVID S. GARDNER, to appear for the first time in the next edition of NEBULA.

The same issue also contains unforgettable tales by prominent authors WILLIAM F. TEMPLE, CHARLES ERIC MAINE and others, to make an outstandingly enjoyable issue.

Inside Information

*Have you ever wondered what it
would be like to be outside-in ?*

“**I** say there! Yes, I mean you. Have you ever sat and thought about the ins and outs of this humdrum life of ours? What do I mean? Well, let me explain. For instance, you’ve surely been to a zoo at some time or another, haven’t you? Good! Then you must surely have seen and maybe even felt sorry for some poor old ape staring out of a miserably bare cage eh? Yes, I thought you would have done. Ah! But did you ever stop to consider what the ape’s feelings were or what he might be thinking about you?

“‘All these poor people’ he might very well be musing. ‘All caged up like that. It’s a shame that’s what it is. I can walk around this world at will, but they can’t, not with that wall all around them—’

“What’s that? You don’t agree? Well what constitutes a cage, anyway? A wall built around you in the form of some closed geometrical shape? Well, suppose you go and build a wall all around the equator. Who is fenced in then, eh? Us up here or those down under. Tell me that? Neither? Or perhaps you think

both, it does depend upon the viewpoint, doesn't it?

"All right, then. Let's now shift that wall a little bit; one way or the other it doesn't matter, either north or south will do. Now what? Are you perhaps going to say that the smaller area is now the cage? But why? From a topographical viewpoint either still is, surely?

"Well now, having made that point, I think I shall have to carry the argument a little further. Let's have a little mental exercise shall we, eh? Listen carefully. I think you would agree that your skin is the boundary of your insides. It separates you from the rest of the universe, doesn't it, like a wall if you like, only in three dimensions this time. Well now, how do you know that your skin isn't really surrounding the universe and all the time it's you that's on the outside? Eh? Well, why not?

"Einstein agrees with it, you know. He says our universe is finite, remember that. If you were to set off from me, here, in a given direction, following a beam of light, you'd eventually go right around the universe and then end up back here at my skin! On my opposite side, of course. You would, you know! Einstein said so; that proves it, doesn't it?

"Oh yes, I definitely encircle the universe! Yes, all of it, every bit; but then so do you, you know. We all do, everyone of us everywhere. Yes, it's true enough. We all surround it and each other, too! We're all sort of linked through our personal universes, through a fourth dimension, if you like. You just think about it for a while. It gets clearer, doesn't it? I mean it's so *obvious*.

"Fascinating thought really, isn't it? Of course at times I do feel a little morbid about it. I just crawl all over, or rather under, when I think of all those people and things scratching about in my insides. Yes, I know, it is rather depressing, isn't it? I think —.

"Eh? What's that? Oh, why? I'm having such a nice chat here. I don't want to go! Oh, all right then, if I must. No you needn't bother with that, I intend to come quietly, but please, for heaven's sake when we get back, if you don't change the colour of that wall padding like I keep asking, I know I shall just scream! "

TONY C. THORNE



It Will Grow On You

*When the little creatures of the fields began to die,
no one imagined that the deaths might spread. . .*

Illustrated by Brian Miller.

THE bit of something did a pirouette in the breeze from the open door. It lifted easily, and floated down the long hall. Another door opened, and suction took it into a room. It nestled close to the sleeping form of a dog. Huddling nearer, it seemed to vibrate. It grew with incredible rapidity for a moment. The dog shuddered, moaned, and died.

The Thing was stronger now. No longer entirely dependent on the breeze. A sort of mobility had been attained. Steps sounded, and a foot came close. A mighty effort, and the Thing was clinging to the side of a shoe. Clinging in the desperation of the desire it felt. The need of the life-forces even seeping through the heavy leather. For long moments it clung, gaining strength with each passing minute.

The shoe was removed, flung away. The Thing slid into a corner.

"Helen, I'm going to lie down for a while. I feel rotten."

The man was on the bed, out of reach. The Thing waited.

"All right, dear. I'm going to the store. It's so hot I'll bring some beer. You'll feel better after a little rest. I'm leaving the door open."

Silence, and the Thing itching against the once-friendly breeze. Grown now to the size of a mouse, and almost visible. Crazy angles passing over its surface. Almost alive. Hungry, avidly hungry.

The door at last. A stream of ants busily carrying away a bit of sugar. And then the line sprawled, in the pseudo-comedy of death. Tiny bit by tiny bit the Thing gained.

A small kitten at play on the path was left in the bare-fanged grin of extinction. Stronger now.

A group of children, running in the inexhaustible vigour of childhood. Then one was carried away, white and almost drained of the precious energy of life. The Thing was active.

"Doc, you've got to save her. It would kill her mother if anything happened to her baby. She isn't going to die, is she?"

"No, but it was a close call. She'll be alright now. I can't figure out what happened. I gave her a checkup last week, and she was in perfect health. This is one of the things we say couldn't happen, and then they do. If another attack like this strikes her, though, there will be no hope."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll watch her like a hawk. Where can I reach you if I have to?"

"My office will know where I am at all times. Call me tonight, in any case, and let me know how she is."

The Thing waited patiently. Moving at will now, but still hungry. Waiting, in a dry gutter, for anything. Visible at last. Afraid. The first inkling of fear, of discovery.

A pair of lovers, arm in arm, strolling down the walk. A gradual weakening, and the bewildered boy, staring wide-eyed at the crumpled form.

"I don't understand this. Your sweetheart is the second one today to have this same thing happen." The doctor was puzzled.

"And old Mr. Evart's death was certainly peculiar. The coroner can't find any reason for it. His heart was all right, and I gave him a going-over about a month ago. And even Pete Blain's old horse toppled over today. Something's fishy about all this."

"What can we do, Doctor?" The boy was white-faced from strain. "We can't let anything like this go on. What would cause anything like it?"

"I've told you I don't know. If I did, there would be something done about it. However, I'm going to call the police. They may be able to find the cause."

The Thing lay concealed behind a thick hedge, partially sated. Lying quietly for the moment. A green-winged Lunar moth lit on a low-hanging branch. And toppled, to spread crumpled wings in the dappled rays of moonlight. Still the Thing hungered, now in the first stirrings of knowledge.

Visible now, to any eyes. Only a faint pattern of the other-world corruscations on its surface. Shapeless as yet, neither knowing nor caring. The only emotion, the sating of the insatiable hunger. Energy to live, energy to build.

The tiny crawling and flying things of the night, each giving, under protest, their bit of life. A wee, heavily-uddered field mouse, hurrying home, stopped to moulder where she lay. Her nest of babies waiting in vain.

The Thing cringed at the sudden volume of loud voices and the blaze of light.

"I talked to the Doc, myself, and he said it must be some kind of an animal. But none of the kids saw anything this afternoon. I don't believe in spooks." The sergeant of police didn't sound as confident as he would have liked. "Have they finished searching that last yard yet? If they have, let's get going on this one."

A hand came through the hedge, directly in front of the Thing. The instinct of hunger fought a brief battle with the faint bit of knowledge, and instinct won. The hand groped for a moment, and then it was snatched back.

"Look at my hand! It feels like it's dead. Whatever the thing is, it's in that hedge. Gimme a club."

A smashing impact through the hedge, and a direct hit in the centre of the Thing. Wave after wave of hitherto unknown pain struck in blinding flashes. Frantically it squirmed away to seek a hiding place.

"I think I hit it! Throw a light over here. The club landed on something soft. Here's the place. See, the open part in the hedge where my club went through. Nothing there now, but I hit something."

The search went on and the Thing, lying under a parked car at the curb, suffered almost audibly. The hard-won energy was fading fast in the unceasing surges of pain. It shrunk rapidly into invisibility again, but the knowledge it had gained remained.

The search moved on, and welcome darkness came. A few



yards from where the Thing lay was the opening of a sewer. Long agonizing moments it took to travel that small space, then haven at last.

"Hey Jim, take a look at the sewage before it gets to the tank. Did you ever see so many dead rats? I've seen at least fifty of 'em this morning. Suppose it might be some kind of an epidemic among 'em?"

"Search me, but we better fish out a couple and send 'em to the Board of Health. No use taking chances. I've been here twenty years, and I've never seen anything like it before. Hand me that net."

The Thing was thriving, gaining in size, and learning fast. It crouched by the opening of the sewer, and watched the outer world. Never again would it make the mistake of taking too much from the one. Always the little from the many.

A dog ventured too close to the opening, and was gone. The Thing looked long at the shape before it, and knowledge came to the fore. Slowly it formed the shape of its victim. A cautious few

steps outside and the glad cries of the children.

The single thought, a little from the many. But the avid hunger remained.

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear there was an epidemic of anaemia in this part of town." The doctor was mumbling to himself. "Seems as if every child has the same symptoms. A sort of don't care attitude. They act as if they were about half-alive. Half alive? Good God, that must be it! Miss Crane, get me the police!" The doctor was in a frenzy.

The sergeant was speaking. "I know there was something there that night. I felt the club hit it. And what about all those dead bugs and the little mouse we found? The men all kid me about wanting to be a hero, but, Doc, I know there was something behind that hedge."

"I know there was, Sergeant, but I can't tell you what you hit. Whatever it was, it's back again, and I'm licked. We can't keep every child in town under lock and key. Well, get the men together, and we'll start looking again."

And look they did in daylight this time, accompanied by the languid children and a frisky dog. An affectionate dog who would lean against a leg for a moment or beg for a caress.

The search went on relentlessly. Even into the treetops.

"Hey, kids, whose dog is this? Try to keep him away. I've stepped on him a dozen times."

"That's Rusty. He plays with us all the time now. He didn't use to like to play with us, but he does now." The ungrammatical insight of childhood.

"Well, keep him with you, and away from us. We're too busy to bother with him. Here, kid, pick him up and hold him."

Two hours later one of the searchers looked in the sewer opening. And pulled out the carcass of a brown dog.

"Hey, that's Rusty! See, that's his collar. We were looking all over for him." A medley of childish voices.

A crumpled form lay in the street; the friendly dog was gone.

The doctor was grim. "Sergeant, keep a man detailed to this block, to kill any strange-looking creature on sight. Don't ever let it get near any of the children, or adults either. I have no idea what that thing was, but I know it wasn't a dog. Help me with this child."

The Thing was back in the sewer again. Once more, hunger had triumphed over knowledge. It was eager now. The taste of

the outside world it had known called for return.

It came out at night now, and watched. Watched, and gained. Watched and learned. The way of the lovers in their nightly strollings. The clasped hands, the stolen kisses. Always a contact. The contact needed for the taking of precious energy.

The rats died by hundreds. So little food, in so short a life. So little from so many. Slowly the Thing grew.

Knowledge at last of the way. The long, crawling change. Watchful hours taught the need of clothing. And little by little the need was collected.

The shape took the form of a girl.

The Thing stood on the street corner, and looked about. It went slowly down the walk, pursued by two ardent males.

L. MAJOR REYNOLDS

WHICH STORY DID YOU LIKE BEST?

So that we can give you the kind of story you like best, please complete the ballot form below. Number the stories in the order of your preference, your favourite first and so on. Mail the completed form to the publishers as soon as possible.

The Happier Eden	
Tea Party	
Sustained Pressure	
Inside Information	
It Will Grow On You	
Firstling	

After two months the votes will be counted and the author of the story you liked best will be asked to write another yarn for NEBULA immediately. If any story gets more than 40% of the votes cast, its author will receive a cash prize, depending on the length of the story concerned.

The result of the poll on the stories in NEBULA 4 is as follows:

THE PILOT	
(E. C. Tubb)	31.2%
PAWN IN REVOLT	
(William F. Temple)	23.4%
THIS ONE'S ON ME	
(Eric Frank Russell)	16.7%
AND IT SHALL BE OPENED	
(Peter J. Ridley)	10.9%
ULTIMATE HARVEST	
(Paul Enever)	10.6%
ADAPTABLE PLANET	
(Sydney J. Bounds)	7.2%

NEBULA No. 8 will carry the result of the poll on the stories in this issue.

Firstling

The Second Flood almost destroyed civilisation—the Espuns tried to finish the job.

Illustrated by Bob Clothier.

KENNETH WATCHERSON stood on the hilltop, gazing across the lowlands South of his village. Not even the profuse trees and bushes in the valley bottom could conceal the great waves of silt that extended far as his eyes could reach. A mile away, at the foot of the hill, were the irregular, green-grown hummocks of The City.

A light step came on the grass behind him. He turned quickly, then relaxed. The girl halted two paces away, smiling. *Not dangerous*, he thought. She was scarcely twenty, lithe, almost slight, with long, dark hair.

"You are son of The Watcher," she said. "I have seen you."

He nodded. His father, too, had been Son of The Watcher. The Watcher had been . . . his great-gandfather? Who knew? A man, they said, who had controlled a great apparatus or machine that had watched the heavens.

"I, too, have seen you." He looked at her steadily. "You

are Ruth, daughter of Jesse, from the village North across the hills."

They were silent. The sun was low, throwing the undulations in the valley into strong relief.

"You are a long way from your village, Ruth," Kenneth said. "It is not safe. What brings you?"

She looked down into the valley. "Answer for yourself?"

"To see The City?"

"Yes." Excitement suffused her face. "Did our people really live there, as the old ones say? Or is it a legend, like the legend of the day when the seas came over the earth —?"

"That is no legend!" he reminded her sharply. "The sand and earth they carried lies deeply in all the valleys! I have seen it, high almost as the hills, littered with strange things made of metal, which the old ones called ships —"

Ruth shrugged. "The old ones tell so many strange tales. I do not believe them. I have asked them, and they are only repeating stories their grandfathers told when they were children. A story passed through many tongues changes."

She turned abruptly and slipped away. With a last glance at the mounds hiding The City, Kenneth started towards his village. The idea that had for a full month been forming in his mind had become a definite plan to be carried through.

Few of the village houses were more than one-room high. Of wood, stone and salvaged bricks, the two-score dwellings formed a rough circle. As Kenneth passed a line of bushes a shadow rose from their concealment, grunted in recognition, and vanished. He passed on into the compound, his angular face turned slightly as if he listened for some distant sound, and a spark in his light blue eyes. He caught himself in the attitude, and frowned. He often seemed to be listening—when there was no voice, no sound . . .

The women had made a camp fire, and at the edge of its light stood a man of moderate build, grey-haired, perhaps forty-five. Kenneth touched his shoulder. Julius Justin's opinion was usually worth while.

"I want to talk, Julius."

"Yes?" Justin's voice was quiet, low. "About —?"

"The City."

Justin's gaze flickered around. A woman was carrying wood to the fire; two children sat nearby, watching a man fashioning a boot.

"We'll go to my hut, Ken," he suggested.

There, he halted, the firelight showing strong lines on his face. "First, a warning, if you can call it that," he said. "I saw you

talking to Ruth Sandison, daughter of Jesse. I wouldn't see her again, if I were you."

Kenneth frowned, watching sparks fly heavenwards. "And why?"

"There are rumours that she is strange—that she has gone out in the night, saying someone called, when there was no voice. When she was a child she would sit for many hours listening, they say, though no one spoke and there was no sound for the ear to catch."

He halted. Kenneth looked from the fire to him. "I see, Julius. We met by chance." He considered, momentarily silent. "About The City —"

"Yes?"

"It was built by our people, many years ago?"

"So the old ones say."

"Someone must have built it," Kenneth persisted, and the excitement which always came when he spoke of it began to mount. His pulses hastened; he seemed on the brink of discovery. "If our people built it, there may be things there to help us —"

Justin sighed. "You feel we need help?"

"Greatly!" Kenneth indicated the circle of huts. "If our people could once build a great city such as the old ones speak of, they should be able to do so again. But we cannot! His eyes flashed. "We build stone and wood huts! We dig up and use things we can no longer make for ourselves! One day those things will be used up. We shall have no more sharp knives, no more metal utensils. Already some things are no more, the old ones say. There were drugs in bottles that would cure pain—tiny mach'nes to make light—a score, a hundred things! They are used, and we cannot make more. Every year we lose something we cannot replace. Every year we become more—more—"

"Primitive?" Justin suggested.

"Yes! And I feel the key lies in The City. We must go down there before it is too late, learn how to make the things we need —"

"The old ones say it is unlucky to be in the valleys," Justin objected. "All who were in the valleys died."

"But *you* have been down into The City!"

There was a long silence. "Once," Justin admitted at last. "An old friend heavy with years wished to show me before he died. There is a way down into The City—a way difficult and dangerous, little more than a tunnel amid ruins."

"You will show me?"

"Perhaps, one day."

Kenneth gripped Justin's arm. "*Tonight!*"

Their eyes met for long moments. Justin drew himself free, wincing.

"Quietly," he cautioned. "Someone may hear. Yes, if you wish—tonight. Meet me on the slope above The City an hour after sunset."

He abruptly turned and entered his hut. Alone, Kenneth breathed deeply, calming his hammering pulses. Already the sun was half hidden behind the distant hills and the fire was being built up. He walked slowly towards it, aware of the cold nip of the air. An old man was sitting near it, with a child each side of him, his arms about their shoulders.

"Tell us more," one was pleading.

He nodded slowly. "I will, son of my son. Once our people went at a great pace over the land, yet without running. They soared in the air, like the birds, and sped over the waters. They had machines to take their voices many, many miles, and boxes which carried their words and faces over all the world."

Kenneth moved slowly on. He had heard all this many times before—had himself sat enthralled, when a boy.

"Tell us why we always live on the hills," one lad urged.

"Because it is safe—only the hills are safe. Our peoples who were on high hills lived, and those who were in the valleys died." He wagged his head sagely. "There was no time for those in the valleys to gain the hills. As it was, so it can be again. Only fools and the wild dogs live in the valleys . . ."

Passing from hearing, Kenneth wondered. That legend seemed one of the strongest, most persistent. It was dangerous to live in a valley. Once, long before, he had asked why. The old man had shaken his head. "I do not know why, lad. I only know that it is so. My father told me, and his father before him."

Beyond the ring of firelight, Kenneth halted, listening. Abruptly he had thought he could hear a distant voice—a voice that called, so remote that only some sixth sense caught it. But the night was still, windless. He frowned. Often the voice seemed not to be in his ears at all, but rather a wordless utterance speaking straight into his brain, formless, inarticulate. It came, fleetingly; vanished when he strove to hear or capture it. Now, it was gone. He shivered. The air was cold once the sun had set, he thought.

He moved round to the South rim of the village. The shadow rose.

"You are going out, son of The Watcher?"

"A little while."

"There have been many dogs over the hills of late."

"I'll take care."

Kenneth went on alone. The stout staff in his hand had cracked many a wild dog's skull, and there was a knife at his belt. Often he examined it. Polished, sharp, all metal, it was without price. He longed to make one its equal.

A little way down the hillside Justin waited. He waved, pointing, and began to stride away down into the shadowy valley.

Justin held the burning faggot higher. "We are almost there."

Kenneth followed him closely and they wound on through the stumps of The City. Sometimes rough grass was under their feet; sometimes they sank ankle-deep in loose sand that shone in silvery brown streaks in the moonlight.

"Many of the taller buildings once projected through the silt, they say," Justin stated as he led the way. "The roofs and walls were taken to build our villages. Time has levelled the rest."

They descended into a rift sinking low between the silted building tops and halted at a smooth wall pierced by the rectangular outline of a narrow window. Justin entered, dropping to the floor beyond and Kenneth followed, landing in deep dust. The torchlight showed stained walls.

"There is a stairway," Justin said.

The treads were rusty, often broken, and wound down and down as if to the bowels of the earth. Kenneth felt it difficult to believe that the building had once stood high and clear above ground level. Yet so legend declared. It was many times higher than the tallest building in the village, he thought as they went on and on, their feet scraping on the rusty, littered treads.

At the bottom they halted, standing on dried mud in an irregular tunnel with crumbly, sandy walls.

"There are passages," Justin said. His voice echoed queerly. "They were made by the water draining away through the silt, my old friend said, and are not safe."

Silent, Kenneth Watcherson felt a hundred questions demanded answer. If all the hillocks visible above were building tops, and the buildings were as high as this, The City must have been vast and imposing beyond anything of which he had dreamed. He followed in the red torchlight. There must have been myriads of people, he thought, not just a few hundred, like in the villages.

Justin halted abruptly at a sloping wall of loose, dark sand.

"This way was open last time I came." His tone was uncertain. "We'll try the other direction."

Weeks could be spent in exploration, Kenneth thought. If as many years as the old ones said had indeed passed, much would be destroyed. But metal objects and other things would remain . . .

As they went on he began to realise just how complex The City had been. The flickering torchlight revealed many things to which he could not put a name and once they entered a long tunnel of artificial construction and having metal rails its full length. One building contained many pictures of wonderful devices. Another housed the mouldering remains of countless objects such as Kenneth had never seen before.

"They were books," Justin said.

At last, after a long time, he halted. "You've seen enough?"

Kenneth was silent. He would never have seen enough, he knew. His excitement was almost tangible. "Our people must live in a city like this again, Justin! We must re-learn these crafts, re-discover this lost knowledge!"

"How?" Justin asked quietly.

"Search—discover —"

Justin shook his head. "The villagers' lives are hard and busy. There is no time."

Kenneth sadly admitted that was so. Their primitive, day to day life left no margin for exploration, or for digging away the sands burying these relics of the past. Justin put a hand on his shoulder

"It's time we went back."

They wound through the intricate old watercourses that sometimes followed streets and sometimes cut through damaged buildings.

"Look," Justin said, and halted. "Someone else has been here!"

He held the half-burnt torch before a cavity in the crumbled wall. Silt had been dug away by someone who had tunnelled into an adjacent building. The work looked recent, and more than a single person, unaided, would attempt. Justin listened.

"No one from the village would come down here, Ken." He looked into the hole, and down the crumbling tunnel, his face strained and the whites of his eyes showing. "I—don't like it," he said.

He hesitated, then went on, walking rapidly. Kenneth stopped him at the foot of the derelict spiral stairway. His light blue eyes and angular face shone with eagerness.

"I'm going to stay—to search by myself!"

Justin drew in his lips. "It's not wise —"

"You'll give me the torch?"

"If you wish." Justin's face expressed unease. "But —"

Kenneth took the faggot, hissing with burning resin, from the other's hand.

"I'll light you to the top of the stairs," he said.

When Justin had gone, he descended and stood in the silent tunnel. Once again a voice seemed to be calling to him—demanding his attention. Yet when he turned his mind to it it ceased, as if a whisper intended for the subconscious only.

When the feeling had passed he began to explore, carefully noting every turning he followed.

Some rooms were full of rusty masses of machinery. Others were silted up and could not be entered, though sand had not penetrated into the central rooms of many of the larger buildings. Time after time he followed a rough channel cut by waters of long before until he reached a wall, then searched for a window or door to enter. His sense of wonder increased and he lost check of passing time.

At last, in an inner room, he emerged upon a scene that made him pause in astonishment. The walls and floors were unstained and perfect. Chairs stood as if placed there that same hour, and shelves were filled with the things Justin had called books. He opened one, but the lines of tiny symbols meant nothing, and he replaced it, looking around. He saw now that at some earlier period the door had been tightly closed so that the room had been saved.

Padded seats faced two upright boxes that stood alone. He walked round them, trying to remember the few words he had been taught so that he could decipher the words on the boxes. "HISTORY MACHINE SCHOOL GRADE I" he read laboriously. There was a button marked "ON" and a blank screen. He pressed the button, starting as a humming began and the screen sprang to life.

Coloured views of amazing cities played on the screen. A voice began to speak from inside the box, abruptly became harsh, then ceased, but the changing scenes continued. He sank into the nearest chair, all else forgotten.

A sphere like the Earth-Globe map Justin had once showed him appeared, receding, circled by an object he immediately recognised as the moon. From space, clearly outlined, came thousands of irregular bodies, following the moon and passing her. Her

orbit changed, wobbling, and the scene flashed back to earth. Unspeakable waves rose on all the mighty oceans of the world, sweeping over continents, torrenting with terrible fury down valleys, often overtopping the very mountains themselves. Kenneth stared, only half understanding, dimly wondering whether this was prophesy, prepared as a warning before the event; or an actual record, by some miracle saved. The beautiful cities sank beneath the sea and sand, and water flowed where dry land had been. A mountain peak flashed into close-up, and from it a silvery streak burned up into the heavens. A scene showed the streak nearer, long and shining as a knife-blade, but lined with what seemed to be tiny windows behind which lights burned. Kenneth frowned. He would have called it a ship, he thought. But the old ones who had described ships had said they went upon the sea. This one had seemed to leap from the earth up into the sky. It was incomprehensible.

The screen went dark and he saw that it was the end. He rose, realising with a start of dismay that his torch was almost burnt out. Amazement at the things he had seen, and only half understood, changed to fear. The way back to the staircase was long and uncertain—impossible if the torch failed . . .

Even as the fear jerked into his mind the torch hissed, spluttering. The flame dipped, rose brightly, then went out. Darkness came, close and total.

Eight light years away planet N7 glowed under a pinky sky. Her red sun was setting beyond a jagged skyline and Bill Travvis let his gaze circle along the horizon, taking in the desolation. The raised table of scorched pumice extended far as his eyes could reach. His gaze returned to his ship, whose underside was buckled inwards like tinfoil.

He swore and the word rang in his helmet, then silence returned, broken only by the hiss of oxygen. He walked once round the ship, plodding stolidly under the weight of his suit and equipment, and the pull of 1.4 gravity.

Broken inner bulkheads showed, and mechanisms irreparably damaged. A half-mile furrow scarred the pumice, showing how she had struck at several hundred miles per hour. The emergency port from which he had struggled half unconscious, hung open. She would never fly again. He turned his back. She was scrap. The glancing impact had ruined her while he was yet far from his destination. That destination must be reached—the message he



was to deliver was vital.

The daylight was going and at the zenith a bright star already showed. He drew his belt tight, feeling for the message pouch at his side. It was intact. He zipped it open and took out the sealed envelope. It was undamaged. And it should be delivered, he decided. Atmospheric conditions made radio communication impossible. No telephone lines existed. Therefore upon his own determination delivery depended.

He set off briskly across the plateau, the shoes of his pressurised suit crunching over the porous lava. Delivery should be made . . .

He judged that he had walked two miles before he realised that he was being followed, and he halted, listening. The planet's two small pinky moons hung near the horizon, casting a weak light upon the uneven, fissure-torn pumice.

Behind him something like a long, low hillock moved, seeking from side to side to find his trail. He stared, striving to discern its outline in the dim light. The hillock was thirty feet long, eight wide, and two high, and ran like a huge flat woodlouse on many legs. He wiped his faceplate, momentarily trembling. He had been told that dangerous life-forms existed, but had not expected

to meet them at first hand. Worse, he was not armed.

He began to hurry. The night was soundless. His steelshod boots crunched and the weight of his suit seemed to have increased. The sack of food-capsules and first-aid bore heavily on his back, and each time he looked back the flat, land-whale of a creature was still following, but nearer. It had three huge, dim eyes each side, at the front. There was no discernible head, but a frill that fluttered over the ground. Dark fawn, with darker spots irregularly along its sides, its body tapered into a long, thin tail. It moved like an invertebrate.

Soon he began to run with long, easy strides which he hoped would conserve his energy. When he looked back he saw that the creature was still following, flowing over the rocks.

He hastened and found himself upon fissured, uneven ground. Cracks large enough to trap a foot spread everywhere, meeting crevasses down which a man could fall. He saw that the creature was a bare fifty yards behind, and scrambled on, his breath growing thick and ragged. Beyond was a plain of smooth pumice. He reached it and sprinted, not stopping until the pain in his lungs was intolerable.

The light had dimmed and he saw that one moon had set. The creature was confidently crossing the broken rock as if aided by the dimmer light. He shivered. When the second moon went, it would be inky darkness for him, but the thing that followed would still see . . .

He turned the suit oxygen a little higher, panting. *He must hide*, he thought.

He ran on, sweating inside the suit, looking for somewhere to conceal himself, or for a crack which might pass his body, yet not allow the creature to follow. His message must get through. A world depended on it.

Kenneth Watcherson stood motionless in the inky darkness, wondering whether he dared hope. Moving with infinite caution, he had tried to retrace his way, but had known himself lost before the hour was gone.

The sound that had brought hope was repeated—a girl's voice, calling, very far away. He shouted, making the tunnel echo. When the echoes had gone silence returned and there was no answer.

He moved on, a hand extended to touch the crumbly sand wall. Far ahead a faint glow broke the utter blackness, growing steadily until a torch came round the corner, carried by a girl whose dark

hair hung about her shoulders.

"So it is you, Kenneth, son of The Watcher," she said.

He felt untold relief. "I thought I was lost—I stayed too long. There are wonderful things—"

"I know," she said, and held the torch high, looking down the tunnel. "I have been here before. But now we must not stay. Others have been here—people not of our villages, who may wish us harm."

He recalled Justin's words, and the signs of digging. Yet it seemed impossible.

"If not from the villages, from where, Ruth?"

She made a gesture expressing ignorance. "It will soon be dawn, above. We must go."

She turned, leading the way without hesitation. They ascended the steps and emerged through the window. A grey light showed the dawn was not an hour away.

"Much of what the old ones tell is true," Kenneth said with emotion. "There were great cities. The moon and earth wobbled and the seas rose over the things our peoples of long ago had built."

She gazed at him, brow puckered. "The moon—*wobbled*?"

"Shooting stars swept in from space, turning her, perhaps bombarding the earth . . ."

He wondered whether they would ever know the exact details of the catastrophe. Probably not. But its results were everywhere apparent in the silted valleys, the hills of sand and mud.

This girl seemed to understand many things, being wise beyond her years, he thought. He put out the torch.

"Our tribes are going downhill to savagery—and extinction. Every generation loses a little. Mere existence has become more important than learning or progress. Knowledge is forgotten, lost. In a few generations it will be too late—it may even now be too late!"

"I know." Her eyes were sober. "My father once told me that there was a tribe away beyond the hills who has tried to save the old knowledge and sciences." Colour and anticipation came to her face. "I am going to join them!"

They started along the rift and Kenneth felt his inner unrest increasing. Life at the village was stagnant. Of them all, only Justin spoke of things other than those connected with the ordinary, day to day, elementary life. Once, a year before, he had sighed. "Once the creators of great cities, we have become a tribe of hunters and shack-builders, Ken!" he had said. "Ten generations hence we shall be cave-dwellers—or extinct!"

At the foot of the slope they parted, and he watched the girl called Ruth, daughter of Jesse, hasten on until she was gone from sight. The sun was rising. He turned towards his own village.

Julius Justin stood with his back to the sunshine and shook his head slowly. "I think you should stay, Kenneth," he stated quietly.

"But the village is—stagnant! They seem to think everything always was like this, and always will be. There's no progress, no improvement —"

"All the more reason why you should stay," Justin said quietly. "A few like you can help the others. I've tried to keep interest and knowledge alive. You can help. We *must* stay, for their sake, don't you see?"

He made a wide gesture, taking in the huts. Kenneth felt torn between agreement and impatience. When so few of the villagers bothered to think for themselves, it was important that the more intelligent and knowledgeable should not desert. Yet the rumour Ruth had spoken of had set his blood racing.

"I—I can't promise to stay," he said. His gaze settled on a group talking at the other side of the ring of huts and he wondered if something unusual had arisen to stir the villagers' interest. At this hour the clearing would normally have been deserted.

Justin followed his glance. "You were down in The City until dawn?"

"Almost."

"Then you wouldn't have seen the lights in the sky?"

A shock ran through Kenneth. "Lights in the sky?"

"For about an hour, well after midnight. Blue, moving very fast."

Kenneth looked at the talking group and Justin's face. The latter expressed strong curiosity and Kenneth wondered what had happened.

"Tell me," he urged.

"It wasn't long after I got back. One of the lads who was outside noticed, and began calling his parents. There was quite a hubbub —"

"And the lights?"

"Like shooting stars, but much nearer and bigger, and blue. They seemed to leave a trail of blue sparks, and to be descending."

Kenneth wished he had been able to see. "Which way did they go?"

Justin pointed away over the distant hills towards the lowlands

beyond. "That way. They were very low over the hilltops, and still descending."

"Someone will go to—to investigate?"

"I don't think so," Justin said slowly. "They were travelling so fast that they may not have struck earth until they had gone scores of miles. It was probably a shower of shooting stars, the old ones say, and it would be foolish to search."

He fell silent, as if there was nothing to add to the scanty information. He did not appear satisfied with the explanation he had given.

"You don't believe they were—shooting stars," Kenneth stated with conviction.

Justin expelled his breath. "I don't. They were too low, too regular —" He paused. "Yes, regular, equally spaced, travelling in two lines —"

He left it at that. Kenneth could not quiet his inner restlessness, and long before noon came he knew that he could not stay in the village. He must find, instead, if any truth lay behind Ruth's words, and what the lights in the sky had been.

Eight light years away Bill Travvis gazed up from a cleft into the pinky moonlight, the rasp of his breath loud in his ears. The great silverfish was casting from side to side, seeking his trail with vibrating fringe. It came towards the crevasse and he drew back until the rock bit his sides with an abrupt jerk. For a moment he feared the suit was torn—without oxygen, the atmosphere would support human life for scarcely twenty seconds. But the pressure-gauge reflected in a tiny prism near one eye remained unaltered.

A heavy shape obscured the slip of moonlight sky. Something waved like a fan along the edge of the rift. The creature began to follow the opening, searching for a wider spot into which it could force itself. He watched, conscious of prickly sweat on his forehead.

The creature passed thrice along the cleft, then withdrew from sight. The scrape of its many feet on the pumice ceased and silence returned. Holding his breath, he listened. The quiet was a total absence of sound that did not reveal whether the great silverfish was waiting at the edge of the crevasse, or a mile away.

He waited, damning the chance that had caused a fault in one of his ship's control jets. But for that the vital message would have been delivered hours before.

When twenty minutes had passed without sound he worked his way stealthily to the edge of the cleft. He wished that he could

wait until dawn. But the nights were long, and his oxygen might not last.

His head rose slowly above the jagged edge. The plateau was dotted with irregular shadows, but none of them moved. The remaining moon had already dropped appreciably towards the horizon.

He climbed out and stood on the edge of the cleft. The noise of his steel-shod boots seemed to warn all the silent night of his presence. His eyes smarted with staring through the dimness and he bit his lips, thinking of the twenty miles of terrain which he must cover on foot. As time passed the remaining hours of life slipped away in the measured hiss of his irreplaceable oxygen.

He reduced the flow slightly and set off with long strides, only halting once to examine the sky. Stars shone, weak and distant. He could not distinguish the one about which circled the planet he had the duty to save . . .

He had been walking for almost an hour when he became aware of a loss of tension around his waist. He halted in apprehension. The belt was gone, and with it both pouch and vital message.

When, he wondered. Memory came. The tug at his suit when he had hidden in the cleft. The buff envelope lay there. So sure was he that he could almost picture it as if by second sight. The belt, snapped by a needle of rock . . . The pouch, with the message that he must deliver to the only man able to act upon it . . .

He looked ahead, where safety lay. Then back over the rough, uncertain miles where danger was. Then abruptly he turned, reduced the flow of oxygen again, and began to retrace the way he had come . . .

With the hilltop at his back Kenneth Watcherson gazed down the slopes in the afternoon sun. The group of villages lay far behind and he was acutely conscious of the stillness. Trees and bushes dotted the slopes, thick with rough grass, and nothing moved within his field of vision.

In the back of his mind a voice had seemed to whisper, then had as abruptly ceased. The voice had seemed to call, demanding that he give heed—a whisper of some sixth-sense. Then it was gone.

He went on towards the lowlands. He had never mentioned the voice, even to Justin, who might have dismissed it as mere fancy.

He made his way across a broad dip that lay between two

hills, ascending towards a rise that should give a broad view of the lower ground beyond. Higher up were brambles and thorn trees through which sheep had made winding trails. He was half way up the slope when the sound of someone hastening through the bushes came, higher, ahead and approaching. He pushed back behind a clump of brambles, watching the path. Alone, this far from the villages, it was best to remain unseen . . .

The noise of hurried progress came nearer and quick, panting breathing. Bushes up the trail parted and a girl with torn limbs and clothing appeared, half running, half stumbling. Kenneth's breath hissed between his teeth. Ruth, daughter of Jesse . . . and *afraid*, if he had ever witnessed fear.

He stepped into the trail. She halted, eyes wide, one hand going instinctively to her throat, a half cry stilled on her lips as she recognised him.

"*You*, son of The Watcher. I was afraid —" She looked back, breathing heavily.

He listened. No sound came down the hillside.

"You're not being followed," he said, striving to reassure her.

Much of her terror remained. "We cannot be sure—they could come soundlessly —"

"Who?"

She did not answer, but stood gazing back up the slope, her eyes still dilated. He took her arm gently.

"Someone was following you?"

She shook her head quickly, her dark hair swaying. "No—no, not *men* —"

"The—*dogs*?"

Again the quick head-shake. Her breathing had grown less heavy, and her pallor was going.

"Not men, nor dogs, Kenneth," she said. "Something unlike either—like nothing I have seen before —"

Terror had begun to creep back into her eyes. He saw that she had come a long way, and that her fear had been extreme.

"Where did you see—them?" he murmured.

"Beyond the hills in the valley."

"Then you're safe here."

She looked at him, her gaze searching, and abruptly smiled weakly. "Yes, we should be safe—here."

He saw that her terror was subsiding, and his mind turned towards discovering its source. Her words had been strange and the placid slope gave no clue.

"What was it you saw?" he asked gently.

The smile vanished. "I—I don't know. I can't explain. Like—like lights that moved —"

He thought of the things Justin had seen. "*Lights that moved, Ruth?*"

"Green dots, all vibrating and dancing —" She halted, obviously lacking words to describe what she had witnessed. "They seemed to—to follow me."

He let it sink in, waiting, but she said no more. He wondered whether the green dots were connected with the blue streaks that had flashed over the villages in the night.

"I'd like to see for myself," he stated.

She shook her head. "It would be dangerous!"

"It may not be."

It took him fully twenty minutes to convince her. At last, reluctantly, she agreed.

"I will show you the way," she said, and turned back along the trail. "It will take an hour. I had run a long way."

More than an hour had passed when they approached the final rise over which they could observe the lowlands beyond. Ruth's agitation increased and Kenneth wondered what he was to see. She moved more slowly, parting the bushes that grew near the skyline under clumps of saplings.

"They were half-a-mile away, right below here," she whispered.

He cautiously raised himself, his gaze slowly taking in an increasing area of the scene below. The flat, marshy ground stretched away into the hazy distance. Parts were sand, too salty to support other than patches of coarse sea-grass. Nearer, a profusion of trees and wild plants of all kinds showed where a strand of rich alluvial mud had been deposited, and beyond the ridge of vegetation was a sight that made Kenneth pause with held breath.

"That's—them." Ruth's voice quivered.

Kenneth held her arm. Green dots, she had said, and the description fitted. The dots moved, wavered and oscillated like a vast swarm of fireflies. Each a foot or more across, they hastened hither and thither near the ground, or rose and congregated in turning, swirling masses. Half hidden behind the trees, a ridge of newly-excavated sand and earth was visible, forming a wall ten feet high and as mathematically level as if formed by a mould.

"That wasn't there before," Ruth said in his ear.

Kenneth watched, scarcely breathing, certain that the ceaseless movement of the faintly luminous green dots was not purposeless,

but directed towards some end.

"They must have built the wall," Ruth whispered.

"Perhaps. You're sure it wasn't there before?"

"Yes." She was silent a long time, then stirred. "What—what are they?"

He did not reply. He could give no answer, no explanation. He could only assume that the things, whatever they were, had built the wall, and were therefore purposeful and probably intelligent. He felt Ruth start.

"I believe they've noticed us," she said uneasily.

Several of the dots had left the others and were moving slowly towards the foot of the slope. Kenneth felt sure that nothing, however keen its vision, could have seen him looking from among the leaves. Yet the dots were coming slowly towards them, moving smoothly several feet above the ground like orbs of shimmering light.

He drew back until the skyline concealed their movements. Ruth seemed to be right. The things were aware of their presence on the hill.

"It's not safe to stay," she said, her eyes pleading. "I'm afraid."

She turned suddenly away and began to hurry into the dip that rose towards a higher ridge of the hills beyond. He hesitated, then followed, catching up with her so that they jogged on together. At the second ridge of the hills he paused and looked back. Three green orbs had just appeared among the trees they had left, five hundred yards behind, and were wavering in and out among the branches. The movement was not aimless.

"Don't stay —" Ruth urged.

The shapes came out from the trees, pausing. All at once, in the silence, Kenneth seemed to hear a voice calling him—but not a voice that reached the ear. It was a voice that spoke directly into his mind, wordless, inarticulate yet urgent. He tried to focus his attention on it, and just as suddenly it was gone.

He looked at Ruth, saw her face was white, and abruptly remembered Justin's words and warning.

"You felt it too," he said.

She looked at him quickly. "The—the *voice*?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "I have often felt it—but never so strongly."

They turned and went on so that rising ground hid the objects by the trees from view. Kenneth felt certain that the phenomenon related by Justin was connected with this new discovery. It fitted,

and the arrival of the green orbs so soon after the "shooting stars" could not be mere chance.

There was no sign of pursuit, and they reduced their pace to a brisk walk. The villages must be warned, Kenneth thought. The things he and Ruth had seen might not be content to remain near the marsh.

The sun was low with coming evening when they laboured up the last slope towards the higher ground beyond which the villages huddled. Kenneth became aware of two forms which had drawn near and were following a path parallel to their own. As the bushes thinned he saw them clearly. They were strangers. The leader was tall, thin, and with an egg-shaped head almost devoid of hair. He came across the grass and stood in their path.

"Greetings, villagers." His voice was faintly mocking, his eyes piercing. "We have been waiting for you."

Kenneth halted. The second man also had the same oddly egg-shaped skull, but was heavily built, with black, hairy brows. He studied them both.

"I do not know you. You are strangers in these parts."

"We are," the thin man said. He paused. "We call ourselves the Espuns."

Kenneth frowned. "That is a strange name."

"Perhaps. We are a strange people. Once, many generations ago, the words Extra Sensory Perception might have meant something to you. Now, I know it does not." He smiled enigmatically. "My friend here understands. We have sought you many, many months."

Kenneth felt Ruth draw closer to him. He faced the strange pair, so unlike the villagers in both dress and manner. Their smooth faces carried expressions of high intelligence; their eyes seemed to look completely through him, reading his innermost thoughts.

"My friend here is Oskin," the tall man said. "Oskin Telpath."

Kenneth nibbled his lips. "That is a strange name —"

The tall man shrugged. "Perhaps. His father's name was Telpath. Like father, like son."

"And your name?"

The other shrugged again. "I am called—The Listener. That is enough."

Kenneth felt Ruth's fingers on his arm. "Let's go," she whispered.

The two did not move from their path. "You cannot go, yet, Ruth, daughter of Jesse," the man who called himself The Listener stated. "Nor you, Kenneth Watcherson. We have things to discuss—to arrange."

Kenneth shook his head, wondering how their names were known. "It is not for us to discuss or arrange—it is for the whole village, if what you propose affects them. I am not their leader —"

"No." The word was very quiet. "But you are something more important than leader. You are *the first* of them to understand. Because of that we have sought you . . ."

His voice faded, but his gaze did not waver. The piercing eyes were full of meaning, and Kenneth suddenly found the phrases going on and on in his own mind, wordless but clear: "*We have sought you because you are the first to understand the ability we have, and which you may yourself have and develop. We are telepathic, of a race of telepaths. Your villagers are not, but you yourself have the power, dormant still, and can understand . . .*"

The wordless impressions ceased. The Listener smiled. "I see you have understood, Watcherson," he said. "We have not sought in vain. We need your help—just as you will benefit from ours."

He turned smartly, his companion at his side. "Let us go to your village," he said.

The uneven miles in the weak pinky moonlight had seemed doubly long. Twice Bill Travvis had mistaken the way and wasted valuable time. Then he reached a wide span of broken pumice, and knew he had gone too far. He turned, seeking the cleft. The search had seemed endless, hopeless—then it was at his feet. He lowered himself. The pouch and belt lay as he had pictured them.

He climbed out, and tucked the message under the strap of a gauntlet, momentarily dizzy. That message must be delivered without fail to the only man who could act upon it. His instructions had been clear.

Something touched his boot. Blinking, he looked down, startled. A dozen creatures large as rabbits surrounded him; others were swarming up from the fissure. As he moved they scampered away, and he began to hurry again along the way his feet had already trodden twice.

The little black creatures ran with him, maintaining their positions, and he paused. Their numbers had grown. Six feet of clear space remained around him—beyond that were a hundred forms, making a dark, close ring.

Something again touched a foot, and he looked down. Two of the creatures were licking a boot with quick, rough tongues, making a sound like a file on leather. He kicked them off. Abraded spots marked his armoured footwear, and he lashed out with his

feet, tottering. The members of the ring moved with him, at a safe distance, never breaking the circle.

He gasped and stopped, lungs straining and cold moisture on his brow. The diameter of the clear space around him began to decrease; a rasping began on one heel . . .

He turned the oxygen up a little and began to walk quickly. The ring resumed its position, flowing on like black velvet, broken only by many tiny eyes. He had been warned not to land, he recalled bitterly. But then, his landing had not been from choice.

He was almost at the point he had previously reached when something alighted with a light shock on one shoulder. A quick rasping began on the metal of his helmet.

He struck the creature down. The ring expanded momentarily, then returned to its former diameter, dipping, rising and falling as it flowed over the uneven ground.

Once he stumbled, and grew aware of his fatigue. The forty per cent. extra gravity meant a lot, when suit and equipment totalled over sixty pounds, he thought, and wondered if the load could be reduced. The pouch and belt were back in the cleft. The message, in its envelope, was under the strap of one gauntlet. There was the pack of food capsules, and first aid pack. He threw them behind. Part of the dark ring of bodies followed, forming a smaller, second ring. Then the diameter of the ring shrank abruptly and wriggling creatures covered the pack.

He went on, aware that the clear space around him was reducing its size in infinitesimal stages. Ahead lay ridge upon ridge of pumice, dark in the pinky moonlight. Beyond, he hoped, would be better going. To his left was unknown ground, undetailed on any map. To his right were rocky peaks, and the remaining small moon was dropping into a position which would take it behind them.

The moon was cradled between two peaks when the pumice plain ahead abruptly ceased. The velvet circle, now mere inches from his feet, changed its shape, and he found himself upon the edge of a precipitous slope. He turned right and hoped it was for the best.

As time passed his steps lagged and members of the velvet circle grew more bold. He could find no more items of equipment to throw away. One oxygen container was exhausted, and it went. Stumbling on, he listened to the hiss from the last container.

The edge of the plateau slowly grew less sheer. He reached a point where a gulf barred his progress, and stood swaying on its brink. His limbs were lead, the weight of the suit unsupportable. He looked at the oxygen indicator and slightly reduced the flow.

A low drumming filled his head.

The velvet circle began to press near, encouraged by his stillness. Quick tongues rasped his boots . . . he looked down and saw that the plateau terminated in a long pumice slope steep as a roof and ending in depths which his eyes could not reach. It was that—or retracing his way miles along the ridge.

Knowing it folly, he lowered himself over, and released his grasp. The momentary vision of a hundred pairs of tiny, bright, frustrated eyes looking down at him faded as his speed increased.

He strove to keep his feet below him, and to brake his progress with outstretched arms. An open gulf loomed up ahead. He knew that only the extremity of his danger had prompted him to such folly . . .

The man who called himself The Listener stood in the centre of the village with his hands on his hips. His piercing eyes surveyed the huts and his almost hairless head bobbed.

"As I expected. Backward. Unprogressive. Primitive. Ignorant, without doubt. Don't expect you'd last another five generations. Everyone forgets a little. Every son grows up a trifle more ignorant than his father." His roving gaze settled on Justin. "Do you work metals?"

Justin looked abashed and shook his grey head slowly. "No. Some of us have ideas of how it might be done, but lack the means —"

"You should devise the means! Man gained his position because he made tools to help himself. Where will you be in five hundred years without tools? Have you any medical science?"

"A few simple remedies." Justin's voice was quiet. "Only those easy to prepare —"

"As I expected!" A tapering hand took in the village. "This type of building shows your limitations! It is backward, degenerate, like the other villages. Primitive—the clearing, the stockade—an unconscious copy of the settlements of pre-history!"

"Things have been very difficult —"

"They will be easier when you employ improved methods! You all waste time and energy prodigiously!"

Listening, Kenneth wondered what the newcomers would do. None could deny the truth of their claims. Old, primitive methods left little time for more than mere existence.

The two had marched directly towards the village, as if well aware of the path. A mile from it, Kenneth had realised that he was following them alone. Ruth had slipped away without word

or sign.

"We shall be glad of any help," Justin said.

Oskin, who Kenneth noted watched but said little, nodded. "Of course. Let us hope you are not so backward as to make our task more difficult."

The pair strode off and the villagers watched them go in silence. The two disappeared into the largest building, made of stone and salvage bricks and used as a store against the winter months.

"Need knowledge always cause arrogance?" Justin murmured.

His tone conveyed that no answer was expected. The villagers drifted back to their own occupations and Kenneth related in full detail what Ruth and he had seen. Justin's intense interest was infused with astonishment.

"It wasn't will-o'-the-wisps—marsh gas burning? Nor reflections on patches of water —"

"No. I wouldn't make a mistake like that. What's more, they were building a wall—and some followed us to the top of the rise." He remembered how the forms had seemed to search among the trees. "They were alive."

"And seem to be connected with the blue streaks," Justin mused. He paused, deep in thought. "What does all that suggest to you?"

Kenneth did not reply. If the orbs were alive—if they had come in the two strings of blue lights—they were intelligent, and not of Earth. The knowledge shook him.

"I can see it on your face," Justin said quietly. "You feel as I do. They're not of this world, but alien—from some other planet or system. The old ones have told of other suns, so far away that light itself takes many years to reach us. These newcomers may have travelled from some such world."

Kenneth watched Oskin and his companion leave the hut and go from sight beyond the circle of dwellings. When alone together, the two never seemed to speak. He wondered if their telepathic communication was of so perfect a nature that speech was unnecessary. It seemed probable. Another hour would bring evening, and it seemed likely to be stormy. High clouds that had piled up before the wind were lowering, darkening the sky, and a smell of rain was in the air.

He was just seeking his hut when upraised voices drifted from the opening leading to the circle of dwellings, and a voice he did not recognise kept repeating his name with increasing wrath. A big man of fierce expression and red face came striding across the clearing and halted.

"You're Kenneth Watcherson?" he demanded.

Kenneth stood before his open door. "I am."

"Then what have you done with her?"

Kenneth frowned, puzzled. "I don't understand."

The big man put his thumbs in his leather belt. "Perhaps you don't know me! I'm Jesse Sandison! That help you to understand?"

"In part. You mean Ruth —"

The other snorted. "Who else? She hasn't come back. I haven't seen her since early morning."

"And why do you think I know anything about it?" Kenneth felt his irritation growing at the other's attitude.

"Because she mentioned your name!"

"I see." He saw that all Jesse Sandison's protective instincts were aroused; that his temper was high, and that he would be a redoubtable opponent, whatever the cause.

"Then you know where she is!" Sandison caught Kenneth's shirt at the chest, the muscles on his forearm bulging. "I may have a name for hot temper, but if I think it's justified —"

"It's not!" Kenneth snapped.

He struck the other's hand away. Sandison clenched a fist. "He said you were together an hour or more back—"

"He?" Kenneth felt his patience gone. "Who?"

"The short one of the two —"

"Oskin Telpath?"

Kenneth felt annoyance at the outlandish pair. If Oskin had mentioned them, he should have had the sense to say that Ruth had slipped away alone. Jesse Sandison seemed to be working himself into a state of fury. His hands were clenched, his expression ominous.

"You're being made a fool of," Kenneth said coldly.

They stared at each other, the tension mounting. A thin circle of watchers had gathered, silent but interested. Fights were not unusual . . . Julius Justin pushed through them.

"Let's get this clear and settle it peacefully," he urged.

Sandison muttered something inaudible and Kenneth wondered exactly what Oskin had told him. It was obvious that Sandison was not the man to favour talk, preferring to use his fists. Many were similar. Life in the villages could be hard. His fury was clearly boiling up to a new heat, reaching the level when he would listen to no one. He curled up a fist, took a step forward, then abruptly paused. His gaze turned skywards, and his mouth fell open.

Other faces turned upwards and Kenneth raised his eyes towards the darkening heavens. A brilliant spot of blue light was

visible through a gap in the clouds, travelling in a descending, spiral path. It swept lower until it appeared near overhead, then curved from sight into the heavy nimbus piled up by the wind.

"Same as all those we saw before!" Justin exclaimed.

The light reappeared beyond the village, its altitude much reduced, and sailed from view beyond the rooftops. *It's landing* Kenneth thought and began to run.

From beyond the buildings he could see a blue, reflected radiance on the trees two hundred yards down the hillside. Fifty yards farther on a slight rise in the ground brought the source of light into full view.

An object such as he had never before seen rested on the turf. Perhaps fifteen paces in diameter, it shone as if made of glass and internally illuminated by blue light. Slightly flattened, its height was only half its diameter, and it shimmered and wavered ceaselessly as if constituted of radiation and energy alone. No fixed, mechanical structure was visible, and nothing to show what the object might contain.

Justin's fingers sank into his arm. "Undoubtedly one of those that went over, Ken, and some kind of vessel," he hissed.

As they watched the blue radiance weakened at one spot until a dark hole grew visible. For a long time nothing happened, then a green shape bobbed from the hole, maintaining a position several feet from the ground. The dark spot slowly resumed its full luminescence and the green shape began to drift away from it towards the village.

"That's one like we saw in the marshland!" Kenneth stated.

The object moved on towards them. Like the vessel, it seemed to have no definite outline, but to be a shining radiance, a spot of green, subdued flame. When it had traversed half the distance its speed decreased and it vibrated slowly up and down, described several small circles, then came on once again.

Kenneth heard a sound of muffled terror behind him and looked over his shoulder. Jesse Sandison, quite forgotten, was running back up the slope towards the village. With him went those villagers who had ventured so far.

"Don't blame them!" Justin said.

They stared at the approaching orb. Seen more closely, it appeared to have an inner core of denser light. Always above ground level, it drifted among the trees and bushes, avoiding them.

"An emissary!" Justin whispered.

The significance of his words only slowly sank in. Kenneth watched, stifling his impulse to run. The object, in common with its fellows in the marsh, did not move aimlessly. Consciousness and

intelligence were apparent. It was alive—though living in some way unknown to Earth. Of pure energy? A mental entity, with no physical body? Kenneth did not know.

"We shouldn't expect living things from other worlds to be like those on Earth," Justin hissed.

Thirty yards away, the object ceased to advance and once again bobbed up and down. A long period of stillness followed, then it again approached. Kenneth felt something tugging at his mind, as if a wordless voice was striving to tell him something of the gravest importance. With the feeling came sudden panic. He turned and ran up the hillside, and found Justin running at his heels. Only when he was at the nearest hut did he pause. Two figures stepped from its concealment.

"You invite danger, son of The Watcher," a voice stated.

It was the man who called himself The Listener, with Oskin at his side. Kenneth stared at them. They used telepathy, they had said. Justin had explained a little of its meaning to him. Telepathy had always been possible to humanity, but had remained unused—a mere sixth-sense that sometimes gave warning of danger.

"Quite soon you could become one of us, and speak mind to mind," Oskin murmured.

Kenneth was silent. The two had been by the hut. Yet the warning that had come into his mind had somehow seemed to originate from the glowing green orb. Or was that his fancy, caused by the strangeness of it all?

"The thing's coming right up to the village, by the look of it," Justin muttered.

They drew back as the sphere of green luminescence approached, retreating across the clearing, then beyond the houses to the hilltop. From there, Kenneth watched the orb circle and bob among the dwellings. Several times it passed through a doorway from sight, only to emerge and go on. It slowly circled every hut and object in the clearing, avoiding only the camp fire that the women had been piling high against night. At last, after a long time, it halted in front of the largest hut and commenced to bob slowly up and down. Justin stirred uneasily.

"It's waiting for us," he said.

It was dark when Bill Travis regained consciousness and memory. A blunt outcrop of rock had struck him. Every bone ached. There was the bruised feeling of damaged flesh at his right leg, and a sensation of oozing, liquid warmth when he moved. With extreme relief he found that the bone was not broken. One ear hurt, and

there was dried blood on his cheek.

He gained his feet, swaying. Ahead was a dark, oily swamp. Behind was the slope down which he had fallen.

"He shall get his message," he muttered.

The sound of his voice came as a surprise to his ears. He coughed, his bruised rib hurting. His eyes went to the oxygen indicator, and a chill swept through his limbs. Even the incoming hiss seemed weakened . . . or it could be that his one eardrum was damaged.

He found a way to the edge of the swamp. Rocky islets projected through the ooze, low, dimly-seen mounds. A faint miasma of vapour rose from the muddy surface. He looked right and left. The swamp continued far as he could see. He pushed one foot forwards, testing the mud and water for depth. Something whirled and wriggled below the surface, snakelike. At knee depth was hard, uneven rock. He lowered his other leg, stepping into the slime. Eight light years away was a world to be saved. It was a big responsibility for one man, he thought. Especially when that world had been their own—their native planet, the earth from which humanity had sprung . . .

The way seemed without end. It ceased to be reality and became nightmare. Borne down by intolerable weight, half suffocated, tired in nerve and muscle, he forced himself on. Time seemed no more. Hours or days could have passed. He did not know, scarcely noticed. Again and again he fancied that light was coming, and that the long night of the planet was at last ended. But there was no dawn. His brain was too fatigued to recall how many hours of darkness there would be.

He seemed to have floundered through mud for aeons, sometimes totally submerged, aware only of things that whirled and pressed against his suit and helmet in the darkness. He rose from the ooze to rocks, scraped the mud from his faceplate, and could discern no star. Only a luminescence of indescribable dimness covered all the swamp, created, he supposed, by billions of minute, urgent living things.

He tottered over rocks and fell headlong. Rope-like shapes snared his feet, and were kicked off. The outside world seemed far away. Only existed pain, effort, the prickly heat of the suit, and deadening exhaustion. And, behind it all, a fierce determination. Those who had chosen him to deliver the message should not be disappointed, he kept repeating. While consciousness remained, his will would drive his aching body onwards.

"You could try fire to drive it away," Oskin stated.

They had watched the alien entity for a long time and it remained motionless before the hut. The villagers had grown restive afraid to approach the curious object or its vicinity, yet anxious to return to their dwellings.

"It *did* avoid the heat," Justin mused.

Several of the villagers kindled brands and cautiously advanced towards the motionless green orb that floated like a patch of light and seemed to be *waiting*. It was odd, Kenneth reflected, how that thought kept intruding into his mind. The alien entity was waiting—but for what? How could a being so strange hope to establish intelligent communication with the villagers, or achieve anything useful for itself if it did.

When the flames were fifteen paces away the orb began to bob excitedly, retreating. It withdrew from the village and down the slope. The dark, empty space re-appeared in the vessel's side; the orb passed inside from view. The vessel resumed its uninterrupted sheen and rose soundlessly. It circled once over the village, gaining height, then sped into the clouds towards the marsh.

"Likely enough that's not the last we shall see of them!" Justin decided.

Kenneth wondered why he felt a strange regret that the alien being had gone. When he returned to the village there was no sign of Jesse Sandison. He decided he would await darkness, then again seek the depths of the silted buildings in the valley, where so many indications of mankind's glorious past lay buried.

The tunnel walls were sandy, streaked with dark, dried mud that looked almost black in the torchlight. Kenneth found himself wondering who the other visitors to the depths of The City had been, and what had prompted them to dig clear the obstructing silt at the spot Julius Justin had pointed out.

He continued slowly, searching for the room where the history machine had been. Memory of the incidents shown remained vividly in his mind. Particularly clear was the image of a slender, shining vessel—if vessel it was—rising from beyond the peaks. If a ship, it must have carried men—valiant adventurers who had flown from Earth while there was yet time, seeking to escape the fantastic waves that had inundated every continent. He supposed he would never know if they had found sanctuary amid the stars.

It was much farther than he had supposed, and he entered the chamber with mounting excitement, determined to see the picture sequence again. There might be other records, too, which would explain more of the past . . .

He halted near the seats, dismay and astonishment blending. The machines were damaged. Panels had been torn loose, and wires and broken components littered the floor. He knew instinctively that the machines would never function again; nor would it be within his power to repair them.

Angered, he searched the room. A rusty metal bar lay behind one machine. It had been used fiercely, devastatingly. The act could have been that of a madman, if not so complete and methodical.

He studied some of the books and printed matter, but found many words he could not decipher. The ancient art of reading was one he must master as soon as possible, he decided. By its means he could learn a great deal. Most of the books seemed to cover ancient periods, and he replaced them regretfully.

He left the room at last, carefully closing the door, and went from the building. Once, many years before, water had apparently found a channel along a corridor and down two flights of stairs, sweeping them clean. From there, the torrent had formed a sandy-walled channel through two rooms, and had emerged from a broken window. The tunnel dipped sharply, levelling only as it reached a hard, artificial surface. Damp suggested that water still escaped from the valley that way when rains were heavy.

As he stood wondering which way to go a whisper began in his mind. He froze, not concentrating upon it so that his conscious thought would drive it out, but letting it build up until it was clearer than ever before. Some mind seemed to be striving to contact his own—to communicate a *warning* Then the feeling was gone, the contact broken. He waited, but the prompting voice did not return. At last he went on. An hour or more could be spent on exploration.

The uneven tunnel divided into two smaller channels, one turning at the exposed corner of a building, mere feet high and with a roof wholly of crumbly sand. He followed it a little way, seeking a door or window in the building wall. There was none, and the watercourse strayed so that soon the building itself no longer formed one side of the tunnel. He halted, looked back, and saw a dim glow as from another torch near the junction with the main subterranean passage. It faded almost instantly and the uneven opening was again lost in blackness.

He hurried back to the junction, but the light had gone. The larger tunnel seemed the obvious one to follow, and he went that way, listening and trying to discern any movement ahead. There was none.

The rooms in the building proved empty, or so blocked with sand that no one could enter them. In one place many floors had caved in,

forming a dark well the torchlight could not penetrate. Nearby whirling currents had made a labyrinth of channels, many large enough to admit a man. In that bewildering maze, cut by rainwater or the draining seas of generations before, many people could remain hidden. No use to search, he thought, and returned to the irregular arched tunnel outside the building.

He spent an hour extending his search for information, without success. Many of the smaller channels cut by the percolating water were impassable; others sank or ascended abruptly, or were blocked by falls of sand. Mud and silt had oozed through broken windows and open doors, drying in caked masses when the water drained away. Large areas lay under sand so tightly compressed and settled that no way through it existed.

Conscious that time was passing, he abandoned the search. It could be continued later, with helpers. As he approached the bottom of the derelict stairway a feeling of danger began to intrude itself into his mind. He began to hurry, then halted. Oskin and The Listener stood at the foot of the ruined steps, each with a lantern that burned steadily. The face of the tall man was mocking.

"We knew you must return this way, Watcherson."

They did not move; seemed, indeed, to be deliberately barring his way. The sensation of personal danger returned, but he suppressed it.

"I did not know you had been down here," he said.

The tall man nodded. "Many times, recently and months ago."

The feeling of danger increased. He had never liked the two.

"I was just going up," he stated.

They did not move so that he could pass. "I doubt if anyone else from the village would come down here," Oskin murmured.

To Kenneth's ears his words seemed to have a double significance—to constitute a threat. Oskin's companion nodded slowly.

"As you say, it is unlikely," he murmured.

Kenneth felt their eyes calculatingly upon him, unguarded now so that the threat in their gaze was apparent. For a careless moment the vigilance with which they hid their thoughts wavered. For an instant Kenneth seemed to read their minds, but this time not because they wished, as on the hillside.

In that instant he learned that his presence—his mere existence—was in some way a danger to an important plan of the pair and their as yet unencountered companions. He did not know what that plan was, only that it was of vital gravity to the two confronting him. Then the guard they kept over their thoughts returned, and the telepathic contact was broken. Both stepped forward . . .

Kenneth turned and ran, the torch flaring and smoking in one

hand. He doubled round corners and turnings, seeking a chance to reach the stairs. Once above ground, he could outdistance them, he was sure.

At first when he looked back two lanterns bobbed in pursuit. Then only one was visible, and that less frequently. He reached a tunnel where the water had run parallel with a block of buildings, sprang through an open window, and crouched against the wall on the silted floor, concealing the torch with his body. Running feet passed the window, and the sound of heavy breathing. He waited a moment, then looked out. No light showed. He vaulted from the room and retreated towards the stairway.

The passages were dark and silent. Half running, he did not falter until nearly at the foot of the stair. Arms folded, the tall man stood there in the gloom.

"You had to come this way," he said mockingly.

Kenneth spun round. A lantern was coming along the tunnel—probably Oskin had gone past his hiding place deliberately . . .

Arms lapped round him from behind, pinioning him so that the torch fell. A low, derisive laugh sounded in his ears. "We shan't be coming back, Watcherson," the voice murmured. Something descended heavily on the back of his skull, and complete darkness engulfed him.

Consciousness slowly returned with a feeling of acute discomfort. Kenneth grew aware of uneven earth under his back, an aching head, and silence. He opened his eyes. The darkness was utter and unrelieved.

He sat up with difficulty, feeling around. The floor was moist sand. Extended, his right hand met a smooth wall, cold and slightly damp. He rested, head clearing, then rose cautiously to his feet and moved to the wall. One hand against it, the other before him, he took two cautious steps. His hand encountered a second wall at right angles. He followed it, met a further wall, and turned again. Two more right-angle turns followed, and he knew that he was back at his starting point. The room was roughly eight paces by ten, and with no door. Judging by the damp, it was probably a basement.

He made a second circuit, feeling as high up the walls as he could reach. They were uninterrupted. Any steps that had existed had either rotted to powder or been withdrawn from above.

He crossed the floor, diagonally and at regular, increasing distances from one wall. It was uneven and damp, but without opening, central staircase, or anything he could reach. His explor-

ation finished, he halted, lips compressed.

His prison had been ably chosen.

The darkness and silence remained complete. He searched the floor for pebbles and fragments of stone to throw at the walls above his reach. The ceiling seemed ten or fifteen feet above. The pebbles rebounded from the walls at all points except one spot high up on a shorter wall. There, some rang on metal and some did not fall back. He tried jumping, grappling the wall, but could not reach the opening.

After a few attempts he rested, considering. He had established that there was an opening, and it was doubtless the one through which he had been dropped. Carefully throwing pebbles, he gauged that it was at least four feet out of reach.

He searched the floor on hands and knees. There was nothing except the moist sand. At last, feeling further search pointless, he squatted on his heels, sifting it through his fingers. It was the only thing he had, he thought—there might be enough . . . He began to scrape and scoop it towards the wall where the opening was.

The hours became a nightmare of scraping and scooping, scraping and scooping. His hands were sore and his muscles ached, but the mound of sand slowly grew. As it grew his elation increased. Such an infinity of toil was worth while when it meant life itself.

The silt upon the floor was shallow. As time passed he had to carry it farther and farther in meagre handfuls. His elation began to change to uncertainty, then to fear. The mound would have to be higher than he had anticipated—he could not spring from it, as from the floor . . . He could not be sure that there was enough sand.

At last he knew that there was not. He scraped the floor, made the mound compact and steep, and still knew there was not. Finally, he stood in the darkness, hope gone.

The entity that was pure mind and energy wavered and bobbed above the buried ruins of The City. Scanning the ground with a sense akin to vision, yet uninfluenced by darkness or light, it located the cleft and sank towards it. It could directly sense the gravitational field of the planet, and it drew itself lower and lower, scanning, until a sudden cessation of radiated energy echoes told it that a space existed. Its inner intelligence centred on its task, it passed through the hole.

The broken staircase glowed under the dim green light of its passing. It wavered slowly along the maze of tunnels, its mind

reaching ahead and in every direction. Mentally sensitive vastly beyond any creature on Earth, it could discern the labyrinth of tunnels, yet was at the same time strongly aware of its limitations. An entity of great intelligence, and maintaining itself at a high level of kinetic energy, it was non-physical. It could not, by its own efforts, have moved even a single grain of sand in its path.

No more substantial than a puff of green smoke, it drifted on, impelling itself along the tunnels towards the human mind that it could sense, and which it must save.

Kenneth Watcherson stared as a faint green radiance slowly appeared above, showing in outline the oblong door which he had failed to reach. Several times he had sensed that something was striving to set up mental contact with him, and he had wondered if Oskin or his companion would return.

A single green orb appeared in the opening, dimly illuminating his cell with cold light. For a full minute it remained there, moving slowly up and down, then it withdrew. The dim, reflected radiance gradually diminished until it was gone.

Kenneth licked his lips. In some odd way he felt his hope returning, as if help was coming, or would be brought.

Time passed and nothing happened. Very slowly his fear began to return, and he wondered how long he had been in the basement cell. Many hours had undoubtedly passed, and the chances that anyone would find him were minute.

He prowled the floor, or sat with eyes closed. An hour later a voice calling his name jerked him to full wakefulness. He shouted. The reply was nearer and a torch appeared in the opening, dimly revealing the face of Ruth. She lay full-length, and he could grasp her hands from the mound. Wiry as a youth, she drew him up.

"So it *was* trying to lead me here," she said.

He half guessed. "What?"

"The green—being. I—I *felt* it wanted me to follow. We're a long way from the stairs."

She looked back, obviously anxious to start at once. Kenneth followed through a maze of winding passages until at last they reached the stairway. Ruth Sandison paused.

"Why do they wish to kill you?"

"I—don't know."

Little more than the fact itself had become apparent. But when their minds were unguarded he had felt that the two newcomers had some plan—and that his presence threatened it. His knowledge ended there.

They emerged into full daylight, mounting the hillside. The tumps of The City, as the villagers always called it, fell away below,

lost in the undulations of sand and fertile mud which half filled the valley.

"Once, when all this happened, a ship left this planet," Kenneth said. "I have seen pictures."

She looked at him, her expression suggesting her mind was elsewhere. "You won't be able to go back to your village," she said quietly.

He started, realising he had already been looking for the path going that way.

"You mean there is danger from Oskin and the other," he said. "Perhaps I can deal with them —"

She shook her head quickly. "Others have come into the villages—their companions. They call themselves Espuns. An odd name." She was silent, thoughtful. "They are a race that has developed the use of telepathy. It could be a great help to mankind, but I feel they are using it for evil ends. When they spoke to you, mind to mind, on the hills, I felt that —"

They passed amid trees and Kenneth wondered how much she knew or understood. If what Julius Justin had said was true, then she, too, might have an inherent telepathic ability waiting to be developed. She, like he himself, seemed to have flashes of such insight.

"How did you know the alien wanted you to follow it?" he asked quickly.

She halted. "I—I don't know. I *felt* it wanted me. Something at the back of my mind seemed to prompt me to follow."

He was triumphant. "You have heard voices that seemed to speak directly to your mind?"

"Yes," she admitted doubtfully. "My father was angry, but —"

"Only because he didn't understand! I've had such feelings, too, but never told anyone! It means *we* may learn to use telepathic communication!"

They gazed at each other and he wondered why so many centuries had passed before this dormant ability of man had emerged. Perhaps the old, busy life, lived by the people of The City, had not left time for it to make itself felt. Or they, with all their inventions, had not needed it.

Farther on, she pointed through the trees. "See."

Part of the village could be seen and a score of newcomers, following Oskin, was visible. They appeared to be making two of the larger dwellings ready for their own use, and as Kenneth watched the man who called himself The Listener came from the second dwelling, pointing and saying something. Two of the new-

comers went off from sight. The villagers stood in a group at the other side of the clearing, obviously undecided and not wholly pleased.

"You're right," Kenneth said. "I can't go back."

She nodded. "It's not safe for you to come with me. There's a cave over the ridge of the hills. You could hide there."

He remembered the spot, where a tangle of bushes covered the slopes and no one ever went. When a lad he had found that cave, and was surprised a second person knew of its existence. It would be a sanctuary—he needed rest.

"There's a spring," she said. "I can bring you food."

Half unconscious from fatigue, Bill Travis struggled up rising ground. The miles of filthy swamp lay behind. Ahead was the low vegetation which covered much of the surface of the planet, and was as yet unexplored. He had ceased to estimate the distance he had already travelled, instead driving himself on and on.

His clothing adhered to his body, and once he had been forced to open his suit faceplate, to wipe it. The oxygen-lacking air made him pant and he closed it quickly, gasping.

Some inner, driving force made his legs pump on and on. Often he scarcely knew that he walked, and he had ceased to notice that the message, slimy, torn, yet complete, had by some miracle remained safe under the strap of his gauntlet. Sometimes he stumbled to his hands and knees, only to rise and go on.

He did not see the shapes that began to move in the low vegetation on slightly higher ground parallel with his course. Upright, stubby and big-chested, they talked together in monosyllables, following and watching.

He mounted rising ground and saw ahead the dim light of coming dawn, pink and weak. Beyond the rise was a valley, fully two miles broad and filled from lip to lip with stunted bushes. He saw it all, but not with full consciousness. It seemed a mirage through which he must plod.

He began to search for a path down into the valley, his breathing heavy from the failing oxygen. Behind him, drawing nearer, crept the natives. Each had a long, reedy tube held by a thong to his back. Their leader unslung his tube, inserted a tiny dart into its mouthpiece, and raised it to his lips, his beady eyes judging the distance to the Earthman. His dart, tipped with a poisonous cactus spine, would penetrate even an inch of tough hide.

Kenneth Watcherson sat in the mouth of the cave, resting. A tiny spring bubbled just out of sight beyond rocks, tinkling in the stillness. Uppermost in his mind was the way in which the alien entity had sought him out in the labyrinth of subterranean channels. That had displayed conscious will—and the desire to save him.

He stared away over the tree-tops in the direction of the marsh. For a long time an idea had been growing in his mind: he would visit the alien encampment again. And, perhaps, would steel himself against taking flight . . .

He rose, refreshed, aware that barely enough hours of daylight remained for him to cross the hills. Ruth was coming up the precipitous track and he went to meet her. She halted.

"You're not going back to the village, Kenneth?"

"No. Across the hills to the marsh."

She looked surprised. "It's not safe! You mightn't get away so easily again —"

"I'm not sure we need have retreated so soon that first time!" he objected. "We assumed the aliens were dangerous. Perhaps they're not. Perhaps they have some other purpose."

She shook her head slowly, determinedly. "It's too big a risk. You don't *know*."

"But I *feel* I'm right!"

He left it at that, not trying to explain. It was impossible to put his thoughts into words. There was only the feeling, strong, possibly mistaken, that the visitants in the marsh would do him no injury.

"I intend to risk it," he stated.

That, too, was difficult to explain. But at the back of his mind was the feeling that the risk was justified, though he did not know why.

Ruth was silent and uneasy. He left her, starting off down the narrow path.

The aliens bobbed and danced behind the earthworks their machines had thrown up, intermingling ceaselessly. They rose and fell, twirling and vibrating, sometimes high, sometimes descending from view. From half way down the last slope Kenneth watched them in the evening light and wondered whether Ruth's warning should have been heeded. The aliens were totally unlike any living thing on Earth. No one could be sure what motives they might have.

He slowly continued his descent. The green orbs seemed already aware of his presence. Some came across the marsh a little

way towards him, retreated, then approached again. His lips set with determination, he walked steadily on. The hazard must be taken if he was to learn whether his guess was correct.

The shapes ceased to swirl, bobbing vertically while a dozen crossed the earthwork and floated towards him, their speed slowly decreasing as they drew nearer. Torn between panic and resolution, he halted, forcing himself to remain motionless. The orbs surrounded him, barely ten feet away, rising and falling very gently. His coolness returned, and he wondered what he should do. They were certainly observing him in some unfathomable manner, but it was not clear how communication could be established. That they wished to communicate he was sure—that belief, an inner prompting, had brought him across the hills.

Very slowly mental images began to form in his mind, unbidden by his own will. Familiar, now, with the latent power of his own brain, he did not try to suppress them. They built up steadily, gaining clarity and coherence, and a new understanding dawned. The problem of communication was solved. Direct mental contact, imperfect as yet, was established—and by the aliens, whose vertical movements were now almost imperceptible.

Why didn't you get into touch with us before? he thought.

The answer came back, wordless yet clear: *Because yours is the only ordinary human mind with which we can communicate. And you must be near at hand.*

Mental images came and went and he seemed to lose contact with the world surrounding him. There was no longer rough grass under his feet and the evening wind on his face. Instead, he was seeing a planet utterly unlike Earth—a world eight light years away, with a pinky sun and two moons. The aliens' home, it was wild and desolate. Strange animals lived in the fissures torn across vast rocky plains. Poisonous reptiles inhabited great swamps, floating in the ooze. The only intelligent animal life-form was squat, sub-human, with barrel chests to compensate for the lack of oxygen. Small-skulled, they maintained a precarious existence on the marginal land by the swamps, killing ruthlessly with poisoned darts everything that entered their territory.

It is an inhospitable planet, he thought.

Yes, but we were adapted to it. The creatures and natives could not harm us—but the beings of your species were not so fortunate.

Kenneth felt astonishment. *My species?*

Those that came many years ago.

Mental images showed a scarred ship slanting down out of the pinky sky, and revealed the terrible hardships of the men she

had brought. Attacked by great creatures, raided by natives, the colonists had been near to extermination. Only slowly had they gained a footing, building a walled city where a huge cataract could provide power for electric generators. There, secure, their children had been born, fathering new generations who had worked ceaselessly to colonise the planet.

The images faded and he became aware that something more immediate and important demanded attention. It was a warning, vital and urgent, and somehow difficult to understand. Only slowly did it begin to clarify in his mind . . . then the vision faded, replaced by a feeling of dismay and terror. He became abruptly aware of the hillside, dark with night, and human voices, upraised and angry. Flaming torches flared up the slope, carried by a score of men.

The ring of alien beings broke and they retreated towards the earthwork, hesitated, then passed over it. He strove to regain the interrupted mental contact but could not.

A shout drifted down the slope. "They're afraid of fire!"

He doubled along the hillside towards bushes that offered cover, uncertain whether he had been seen. Crouching there, he looked back. Some of the men were villagers, but the others he did not recognise. They would be companions of Oskin, he decided, who was leading them down towards the marsh.

Two broke away from the main party, coming towards him, and he started up the hill away from them, following a gully that offered cover. At the brow of the hill he looked back. The two men had come into view, following at a brisk trot. Beyond them, the party had momentarily halted a hundred yards from the nearest ridge of the earthworks.

He turned and began to run. The light was going fast and the way uncertain, but his pursuers seemed to follow with an uncanny instinct and gain slowly. He left the path and pushed among bushes, climbing a rocky slope. Concealed at its top, he watched the two follow unerringly, never hesitating. It seemed they would surely catch him.

He ran on, but whenever he looked back they were behind, nearer, and he slowly realised the truth. Their abnormal insight helped them and if he hid in the densest brush they would still know his position . . . Only one chance remained. He must fight them, one against two, relying on sinew and muscle.

He made for high ground and a clear space amid the bushes. There, he turned, the staff he always carried in his hands, his eyes defiant. The two emerged from cover, halting.

"I've cracked many a wild dog's skull with this," he said.

They parted, circling him in opposite directions and drawing

nearer. He tried to probe their minds, exercising his new and developing ability. It was difficult, but he sensed enough of their feelings to increase his determination to the limit. They intended to kill him. He was the only villager able to gain contact with the aliens in the marsh. For that reason alone they regarded his death as essential.

They made simultaneous rushes from opposite directions, leaving him no time to ponder the significance of what he had learned. He caught the nearest on the shoulder and both sprang back out of reach of his staff.

"Telepathy won't help you when you've got broken bones!" Kenneth growled.

He felt angry blood pounding in his veins. The two circled him like voves, just out of reach, their eyes intent. One bent quickly, picking up a stone large as his fist, and both laughed. The sound chilled Kenneth. It suggested they knew they must win—they were two to one, and could anticipate his every move —

"We'll see!" he cried, and sprang, staff whirling.

The nearer ducked, but not quickly enough. A blow grazed his head and he howled. Simultaneously, Kenneth felt arms grasping his from behind, tearing the staff away. He staggered and fell, his antagonist astride him. The man was strong, wiry—but had not been born and raised in the hills. Kenneth flung him off, rising. The second man had recovered, and sprang. Kenneth put every ounce of strength thirty years of hardy living had given him into a blow which took the other on the chin. The man collapsed.

Branches snapped and Kenneth spun round, then relaxed. His remaining attacker had flown.

He retrieved his staff and set off obliquely along the slope, hurrying. It seemed unlikely that his enemy would give up so easily, when companions who would help were so near.

A weak moon had risen above the hills, dimly lighting the way, and he turned towards the villages. Julius Justin, at least, should be warned, he decided. The aliens seemed to be *friends*; the men calling themselves the Espuns, *enemies*, though human.

He often listened, but could hear no pursuit. If men followed, it was silently, slipping without sound through the trees. The way was long and he judged that at least two hours had passed before he gained the ridge of hills beyond which the villages lay.

At last he emerged upon the highest slope, and halted in astonishment.

The village clearing was ablaze with fires and torches and excited voices drifted faintly to his ears. Beyond the huts, in a broad semi-circle, wavered myriads of green, nebulous forms, each

shining with its own inner light.

He approached the village, cautiously watching for anyone who might be an enemy. The voices grew louder, telling of panic and excitement, and he saw that the villagers were forming a ring of fire beyond their dwellings. Flaming brands were thrust in the earth and piles of sticks were being thrown up ready to light. Among the villagers the strangers moved, urging them on unceasingly. Kenneth bit his lips. The villagers had evidently accepted Oskin and his companions eagerly upon their return.

"Fire is the only thing to keep them away!" a tall stranger was declaring. "They followed us from the marsh —"

Kenneth slipped among the huts, looking for Justin. He was nowhere visible and Kenneth retreated to a spot where discovery was less likely. It seemed that Justin was not in the village, he thought, and began to circle round towards the string of fires.

The green entities had taken up a position fifty yards from the nearest fire and it was not apparent what they intended to do. He approached them slowly, keeping bushes between himself and the village. Three green forms left their companions, drifting towards him, and as the distance decreased he felt mental contact being established once more. He halted, waiting, and they surrounded him. He felt no fear. They had helped Earthmen on that other planet so far away —

And we wish to help you, too, their minds whispered. We have travelled across eight light years of space to reach you, coming alone because no human could travel in our vessels and because they now have no interstellar ship. The humans here who call themselves the Espuns are dangerous. They want only personal power, and use the old sciences for evil ends. They are not like you and your friends, who wish to make a noble new earth.

Our fellowmen on your planet sent you? Kenneth asked.

Yes, the thought came. They, too, developed telepathy, under our guidance. But they are not as the Espuns, but honest and working for the good of all, like yourself. Telepathy is a wonderful power. Distance can be as nothing to it, when its users are skilful. The humans on our planet tried to contact you, but failed. They learned of the Espuns and their plans, and wished to warn you. They could not. Sometimes they thought their minds had contacted you, but the contact was always broken before a message could be given. Your mind is the only one among the villagers they could reach, even momentarily. The Espuns know this, and wish to kill you.

Kenneth thought of the strange planet his fellowmen had begun to colonise, so far away, and experienced disappointment.

Shall I never have contact with my fellows there? he wondered.

You may, the green orbs thought. We set out ten years ago, voyaging to bring this message. Since then we have learned that a human with tremendous telepathic powers is rumoured to live in an outpost in the wilds. A messenger was sent to him, asking him to contact you—to warn you—

The mental voice abruptly ceased and Kenneth saw that a bunch of villagers was advancing behind flaming torches. A fragmentary farewell entered his mind—*We cannot face these radiations you call heat*—then the twirling luminous forms retreated to their fellows.

Momentarily he felt unable to run. Belief and doubt conflicted in his mind. What the aliens said might all be untrue, calculated to deceive him. The green orbs were strange—unearthly. The Espuns, though odd, were human. Could the word of an alien, non-human race be trusted, or was it a trick? He did not know. He wished that the humans of the distant planet had been able to reach him, to explain. Their word could be trusted. He stared at the bobbing green forms and suddenly felt that he was a fool to believe them.

"There is Kenneth, son of The Watcher!" a voice cried.

He seemed not to hear it or notice the flaming brands. Would it not suit the aliens well if a conflict arose between the remaining branches of humanity on earth, so that they killed each other?

A second voice joined the first. "He is betraying us! He is helping our enemies!"

A dozen hands pinioned him.

Julius Justin, flanked by the elders of the surrounding villages, shook his head slowly, regretfully.

"I find it difficult to believe you," he said.

Kenneth was silent. He had expected this, and knew that his own explanation had been unconvincing. He himself was no longer convinced, but felt that the aliens were enemies, and his indecision had undoubtedly shown itself.

Jesse Sandison stood near, his thumbs in his leather belt. "You were talking to them," he accused.

"I was."

"To betray us?"

Kenneth shook his head. "No."

Sandison leaned forward. "Oskin and the others say you were with the aliens in the marsh, too!"

Their faces were grave. Kenneth sighed heavily. He had been fortunate to secure a fair hearing, he supposed. Justin had insisted

on that. But now there was little enough he could say in his own defence.

"We may receive a—a message from our fellows," he pointed out.

There was a long silence. "From those men who flew to another planet?" Sandison asked, his voice unbelieving. "What proof have you such a thing ever happened?"

Kenneth opened his lips to speak, but was silent. The history machine had been destroyed—undoubtedly by Oskin or his companions, so that no proof would be available.

"There is no proof," he admitted. "But this message may come —"

"And from what you say you will be the only one able to receive it," Justin put in.

Kenneth read disbelief on his friend's face. Justin wanted to believe—but there was no proof. Kenneth nodded slowly.

"As you say, I am the only one with telepathic ability sufficiently developed—"

The disbelief was on all their faces. They had not been down in The City, or seen the ship rise from the peaks. Everything of which he spoke was new to them, and incredible. At the back of the gathering the man named The Listener had been silent, apparently anxious that the prisoner should have every opportunity to clear himself. Now he rose.

"We have used telepathy for many, many years," he said smoothly, "but we have received no message from fellowmen on another planet, and never anticipate we shall."

His piercing eyes were fixed straight ahead and Kenneth knew he lied. The Espuns *knew*—knew also that eight light years of space existed between earth and that distant world, and that there was no ship large enough to cross, bringing word back to Earth. Already the Espuns were in virtual control of the village and planning to drive the aliens away, their warning undelivered. Bitterly Kenneth wished that others of the villagers had his ability, and that he was not the only telepath among them, a firstling whose unproven word no one would believe.

"Seems we're wasting time talking any more," Jesse Sandison stated abruptly.

The two men plodded on in the pinky sunlight, walking awkwardly from the load they carried. They mounted a path, passed inside the pressurised dome at its end, and opened their suit helmets immediately they had laid their burden down.

"He looks in a bad way," one said.

He studied the insignia on the breast of the mud-caked suit and gently pulled a torn envelope from under the strap of one gauntlet. He looked up.

"A message! Better get a doctor—and the C.O."

He waited until his commanding officer appeared, brisk and upright, and saluted.

"We found him over in the valley, sir. Collapsed from fatigue, I think. Another few minutes and the natives would have got him." He held out the envelopes. "It's probably urgent, sir."

The C.O. opened it and read quickly. His brows rose; he frowned. Finally he folded the message. From where he stood he could see through the transparent wall of the dome of the outpost.

"It's come all the way from headquarters!" he said. H.Q. was in the great, noble parent city first built and almost half way round the globe. Many times in his career he had wished some direct means of communication existed, but the planet's static made radio and telegraphy impossible. "And important right enough! Get Barnaby."

The lieutenant's features expressed surprise. "*Barnaby!*"

"Yes! The telepath! Seems he's the only man here they think can get a message over to someone *eight light years away!*"

Jesse Sandison pushed a way through the crowd. "Let the girl speak!" he ordered gruffly.

Ruth halted, her eyes fixed on Kenneth as if her words were for him alone. "I believe you! I *know* you're speaking the truth!" Her gaze swept over Oskin and his companions. "They're lying! They want to dominate us—be our masters!"

Kenneth scarcely heard, or noticed that she continued. Suddenly a mind had seemed to try to contact his own. Immeasurably powerful, noble and kind, the brain trying to set up communication seemed very remote . . . he opened all his levels of consciousness to it, exercising to the full his telepathic ability, and the crowded gathering snapped from sight and hearing.

He seemed to stand in a city under a pink sun, facing a man who was white-haired, noble and kind.

"I am Barnaby," the man was saying . . .

He pointed through the transparent dome to the city, and with a gesture indicated that there were other cities beyond. He beckoned, and two officers brought in a companion whose face bore the print of hardship.

"This is Bill Travis, who brought me the message," Barnaby said.

Travvis smiled fleetingly, and Kenneth felt he deserved undying gratitude. In the vision Barnaby's lips seemed to move again.

"We came from Earth in the ship made before civilisation was destroyed. In a few years, now, we shall again have ships able to cross space back to you. Until then, remember the aliens are your friends and ours. They helped us here. They have crossed space to help you. And to warn you against a race whose minds we have sometimes contacted—who are humans, yet evil . . . Do not help them. They will destroy everything worthy of Man. The aliens are harmless, gentle and wise. Mankind and they will look to the stars together, seeking other planets. Explain to your friends. You are the first of the splendid new race to inhabit Earth, telepathic yet not cruel . . ." The vision began to fade as if contact could no longer be maintained. "Remember we shall be with you within the decade, travelling in new ships we are building —"

The city under the dome faded, and Barnaby was gone. Kenneth opened his eyes and saw terror on the face of Oskin and in the glances of all his companions.

"*They are coming in new ships,*" Oskin breathed.

He seemed to have collapsed; his face was white, his panic obvious.

Seconds passed in silence, then a wave of understanding spread through the villagers. "Kenneth, son of The Watcher, speaks the truth!" someone cried.

A sudden scurry stirred the throng; a babel of voices rose; fists waved—

At the edge of the village Kenneth and Justin watched the last of the Espuns being driven none too kindly down the hill. Kenneth turned his gaze upon the aliens bobbing and hovering as if awaiting his presence. Yes, these beings of energy and mind could help Man, just as Man might help them. There was much to be done before the human ships came, opening up space-routes between Earth and a multitude of other planets. One day, perhaps, he would meet Bill Travvis, he thought, and would shake his hand.

"The Espuns were an oddity," he murmured. "Perhaps are some kind of mutation. They'll die out." He turned his gaze again to the green orbs. "I'd better go and see what our friends down there have to say."

A heavy hand touched his shoulder. He turned to meet the eyes of Jesse Sandison. Sandison smiled.

"Good luck, son of The Watcher."

Kenneth nodded and began to walk down the slope.

F. G. RAYER

SCIENTI FILM PREVIEWS

News and Advance Reviews for Science-Fiction Film Fans

From FORREST J. ACKERMAN

Dublin, Ireland. *Flash!* RAY BRADBURY GIVES BIRTH TO A WHALE! Yes, the Martian chronicler has turned mariner chronicler, and on the old sod has made the classic sea story, "Moby Dick," into what we may expect will be a "whale" of a motion picture script. While this is not strictly in the line of science fiction, the next announcement is: It is anticipated that following the completion of the Melville script, Bradbury (still in the Old Country, possibly Biarritz) will turn his own "Martian Chronicles" into a scenario! For production by John Huston, of "Sierra Madre" and "Moulin Rouge" acclaim.

Fan Morris Scott Dollens, now professionally at work producing "Dream of the Stars," supplied the Interplanetary backdrops for the film. Consensus of opinions: If you've only two pence in your pants pocket, better save 'em up to two shillings for the next *Nebula*, rather than shelling out at the box-office for this unfortunate crash-rocket of a film.

On the other hand, the technicolor RIDERS OF THE STARS with Herbert Marshall, Richard Carlson and William Lundigan promises to be a first-class treat. Scripted by Curt Siodmak, who gave us *FPI*, *TransAtlantic Tunnel*, and *The Magnetic Monster*, it is the highly dramatic story of a possible occupation of the future: meteor-hunting. Experimental, space-bound rockets keep crashing, and upon analysis it's found

that their molecular structure has completely changed, become crystalline. The tough metal of the rockets runs into something in the sky that causes them to shatter into fragments. As Dr. Donald Stanton, chief of the Rocket Proving Grounds, puts it, "It looks like we've run into a cosmic stone wall." Consultants Jane Flynn, Paul Dryden and Frank Warner agree from the medical, biological and engineering viewpoint, respectively. Says Dryden: "It's obvious that at the rocket's maximum altitude of 426 miles it was bombarded by a strong concentration of cosmic rays." Problem: is it possible to devise a cosmic ray screen? Man who might know the answer: Dr. Jerome Lockwood, currently conducting a university seminar in theoretical mathematics. Summoned to the Office of Scientific Investigation, in the company of eleven other technicians and scientists he is secretly subjected to irritability, claustrophobic and a number of other psychological tests. One by one the candidates for the mysterious project are washed out, and then it comes to the centrifuge tests. Richard Stanton, son of Dr. Stanton, head of the O.S.I. Rocket Proving Grounds, is included, and takes 12 g's at a temperature of 135 degrees without blacking out. Jerome Lockwood also passes all the tests. Then the purpose is revealed to Lockwood and young Stanton by Dr. Stanton: "Gentlemen, in order to continue our

work and to win the race of conquering space, we must *catch a meteor in flight*." He goes on to explain: "A meteor travels thru space for an infinite period of time without being destroyed by cosmic rays. Therefore, it must have some kind of protective outer hull around it. *What?* What kind of chemical composition allows it to resist such radiation while our finest steels disintegrate? Those are the questions we must answer." He wants the two men to go up into space and chase a meteor! Capture one in the vacuum of the void, before its outer surface has been destroyed by friction, bring it back to earth intact so its molecular film can be studied. The rest of

the film deals in dramatic, almost documentary fashion with the ascent into space and the search for a meteor, during which one man loses his life. One man actually *did* lose his life during the production of the picture, and another blew off his hand and otherwise severely injured himself. For the first time in any scientific film, the model rockets, rather than being manipulated by hidden wires, are radio controlled, electronically activated jobs, which are expected to lend a great air of verisimilitude to their appearance on the screen. This Ivan Tors production will be followed by "Gog," the biography of Space Station 1.

the best of science fiction

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Of this dynamic novel of murder in the twenty-fourth century *The New York Herald Tribune* wrote: "It is a legitimately clued and solvable mystery problem, embedded in an opulently imaginative story, rich in odd gadgetry and culminating in a splendid surrealist sequence of pure psychological terror." This is a fantastic thriller in which the phenomenon of extra-sensory perception is convincingly projected.

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SIDGWICK AND JACKSON



From KENNETH F. SLATER

SPACEWAYS By Charles Eric Maine ** (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10/6).

Mr. Maine's novel is subtitled, aptly, "a story of the very near future." It is in fact so near that to the adherent of space opera who revels in alien Bems, FTL-drives and intergalactic wars, etc., the book will have little appeal. The plot of the story falls short of an orbit 22,000 miles out from the earth . . . short by some 4,000 miles. And it is around that point that the story is built. SR ONE (Satellite Rocket No. 1) is launched, unmanned, and should settle into a pre-arranged orbit. At the time it is launched structural engineer Colby and Marion Hills (wife of another scientist engaged on the project) go missing. The rocket falls short of its orbit, and settles into a lower one; at first this is thought to be due to a structural fault, but later Hills is accused of murdering his wife and Colby, and of disposing their bodies in the rocket, making room for them by removing some of the equipment. Mathematical calculations based on the altered orbit, and the difference in mass ratio between the weight of the bodies and that of the supposedly removed equipment, are produced as evidence of this. In an impassioned appeal at his trial Hills demands that SR TWO be modified to carry a pilot, and that he be permitted to use the SR TWO to bring the SR ONE back to earth to prove that he is not a murderer, and that the

lower orbit was caused by a fault.

If you have heard the radio play (it has been broadcast at least twice) or seen the film you will know the tragic denouement of the story. If you haven't, why should I spoil it for you? Personally, I've not seen the film, but I have heard—and preferred—the radio version. The intensity of the suspense and the dramatic appeal of the written word falls far short of that of the play. Unfortunate, but true—and understandable. However, there is much more incidental material in the book, the story being told from the viewpoint of the security officer of the project and including much of his own love affair which, for instance, is not given over the radio.

Excellent written, if a trifle slow moving, this is an ideal book for converting people to s-f—being me, I'd classify it more as a "mystery" than as "s-f" . . . it is that close to today!

We would also like to acknowledge two above-average books received before this column was inaugurated: "The Puppet Masters" by Robert A. Heinlein, published by the Museum Press at 9/6 and "The Man Who Sold The Moon," also by Robert Heinlein, published by Sidgwick & Jackson at 9/6.

STARRING SYSTEM: Four Stars: Best of its kind. Three: Good. Two: Fair. One: Mediocre.



Latest News of Fan Activities

From **WALTER A. WILLIS**

Despite the fact that most people seemed to think that last year's World Convention in Chicago was too big, the organisers of this year's one at Philadelphia persisted in advertising that theirs would be even bigger. Well, of course, it wasn't. Attendance was a mere 650, which hardly seems enough for a quorum after the hordes of Chicago. However, by all accounts—except the financial variety—it seems to have been a success, at least from the point of view of the ordinary guest. One of the far from ordinary guests, incidentally, was editor Bert Campbell, of **AUTHENTIC**, paying his first visit to America. (By the way, I'd like to make it clear that it was he that paid it—he wasn't subsidised by British fandom in any way as their representative, and indeed wouldn't even let his name be considered when we were thinking of sending someone to the Philcon. Our representative won't be going until next year and he will be chosen by vote). Bert caused quite a sensation, one awed American fan commenting that his beard was the most fantastic thing in all science fiction, several people asking him did he come over by submarine, and some asking was he going to describe his hair-raising experiences during the programme or, alternatively, challenge Richard Shaver to a debate. Unfortunately his spot on the programme came in the morning

when few conventioners are awake, except possibly those who are just staggering off to bed. I can imagine some of these late revellers casting a delirious look at Bert and deciding they'd lay off the stuff for good. The morning is the time they always put strangers on because they don't know how they're going to turn out. (I remember turning out myself in answer to a frantic telephone call and rushing onto the speakers' dais without even having had time to shave. The audience must have thought from Bert's chin that *he'd* overslept from the last Philcon in 1946).

Fortunately the irrepressible Bert made another and unscheduled appearance later on in the day when during the voting for the site of the 1954 Convention he put in an unexpected bid for London. He actually got 61 votes, too, which makes one speculate what would have happened if in some moment of madness he'd been given a majority. Since only about two of those present would have been likely to afford to come to London, the other 648 would presumably have had to vote all over again for their "regional" convention or do without one altogether. An unthinkable thought. The nomination actually went to San Francisco, being pushed through by the Philadelphia group who thereby made some amends for having captured the honour from 'Frisco

last year by adroit political manoeuvring.

Other notable events were a hilarious speech by Isaac Asimov as toastmaster at the banquet, where the awards were presented. That for the fan personality of the year went to Forry Ackerman, who announced he was passing it on to our own Ken Slater for the great work he has done for fandom and science fiction. The award for best American promag was diplomatically split between GALAXY and ASF. The award for the best novel went to Bester for *THE DEMOLISHED MAN*. The vote for the best fanmag was so widely dispersed, the only people really concerned being fan editors and each doubtless voting for his own, so that no award was made.

One original feature of the Convention was the publication of a daily newsheet, which must have been a great boon for people who were wondering where they'd been last night.

REVIEWS.

SPACE TIMES (Organ of the Nor-west Science-Fantasy Club). Editors Eric Bentcliffe and Eric Jones, 47 Aldis St., Gt. Moor, Stockport, Cheshire. Subscription 7/6 for 12 issues.

From the June issue the covers take a Turner for the better, by way of celebrating the magazine's anniversary. This issue is nicely turned out but suffers from a surfeit of fiction. There are no less than five stories in this issue, four by fans and one by John Russell Fearn—Vargo Statten to you and half the British pocketbook industry. Two of

them are utter drivel. The shortest and best, terms usually synonymous in fanmag fiction, is by Eric Bentcliffe.

ORBIT (Leeds Science Fiction Association), Sept./Oct., 1953. Editor G. Gibson. Subscription 1/- per issue to J. Smillie, 3 New Inn St., Wortley, Leeds, 12. I'm afraid I couldn't possibly recommend you to start your subscription with this first issue—I sometimes think that all fan editors should start with their second issues, just as the week should begin on Tuesday—but it does show a great deal of promise. The most interesting article in this rather small first edition is by Mike Rosenblum, recounting the proud story of how British organised fandom started in Leeds 17 years ago.

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Letters to the Editor

DEAR MR. HAMILTON, There are few pleasures one has available here in Korea, and reading your excellent mag is one of the greatest. When in answer to an advertisement of Mr. Schmidt, I sent in my \$1.50 for a 1-year subscription, I did so primarily out of curiosity, since I had never read any non-U.S. science fiction. When I received your issue 1 I was very disappointed. It appeared to me to be of the type of mag that represented the best in the U.S.—about 12 years ago. Science fictional tastes have changed greatly since then, commensurate with the growing up of the authors in this relatively new field. Particularly I was greatly disappointed in the cover. The second ish didn't improve my opinion very much. BUT . . . since then I have read issues 3 and 4, and now I have become addicted to your very fine publication. There was an abrupt change in cover design, and I feel that it is now up with the best produced on this side of the Atlantic—and Pacific too. I am very happy to see that you now come out bi-monthly. If your future issues show the same degree of improvement as the recent ones, they soon will be out of this world.

Please accept my heartfelt congrats on your present success, and my best wishes (which are quite selfish) for the future.

Sincerely yours,
PETER M. EVANS,
U.S. ARMY, KOREA.

** Many thanks for writing, Peter. I can't say how glad I am to know that NEBULA brings a bit of*

entertainment and diversion even to a place like Korea. Write again, please.

DEAR ED.—what about some more really long stories like your first two novels? Let the shorts go hang—they're only a nuisance in any case. Can't you dicker for a full-length M'Intosh, Beynon, or something? And what about some fantasies with no pretensions to a scientific connection? Or a full-length Tubb, for the matter of that.

ARCHIE MERCER,
LINCOLN.

** Well, Archie, you are the first and only person to request a return to the "long novel per issue" policy of issues 1 and 2. I'll be only to pleased to comply if other readers agree, but in the meantime, I'll stick to the present set-up, which seems to be pleasing the majority very well.*

DEAR ED: For the first time in my life (I am 18) I have found an S. F. Mag. that lives up to my expectations. I was getting bored with magazines that were $\frac{1}{2}$ science and $\frac{3}{4}$ sex when I happened to see your magazine on a book-stall. I picked it up and it looked

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AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that. . . who won £2,000 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless Queen Joan."

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HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Fal-mouth, says, 1951:

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AS SPECULATOR. A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

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pretty good so I took it home and read it straight away. I was so impressed by the stories that I had to sit down and write this letter, a thing that I have never done in my whole experience of science fiction mags.

Yours sincerely,
DAVID WILSON,
SURREY.

** Many thanks for the kind words, David, I hope you enjoy this (and future) editions even more.*

By the way, I'll bet most of that detective-sex muck you were buying had a 1/6 price-tab!

DEAR MR. HAMILTON: Through the good offices of one of your British fans, with whom I have been exchanging S.F. magazines for the past 4 years, I have just finished your Autumn 1953 issue, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

I have read quite a number of British Magazines and I believe I am qualified to say that Nebula is tops in the British field.

It might interest you to know that your magazine will be forwarded to a fan club in Antwerp.

Best wishes for your continued success.

F. C. SPIKER,
TENNESSEE, U.S.

** Thanks for the letter, Mr. Spiker, I'll be looking forward to your comments on future issues.*

DEAR ED: Let me congratulate Mr Temple on his excellent and completely logical ending to his story. I enjoyed it all the more because I was not expecting it. After it had been established that Obalar was always correct in his predictions, came the news that Defoe and whoever helped him would die in three days. When I read that I prepared for the worst in artificially contrived endings, but no! Mr. Temple kept to the only logical conclusion.

Please tell Mr. Bennett that it is always possible to improve a magazine. Despite the fact that Nebula is very good, I am looking forward to improvements with each succeeding issue. In my humble opinion it is either that or stagnate as so many other magazines appear to be doing.

Yours sincerely,
JOAN W. CARR,
M.E.L.F. 17.

** I couldn't agree more, Joan! I'm constantly trying to find ways of making NEBULA better and better, so that soon, there won't be another magazine to touch it in this world—or any other!*

Concluded from page 2
cater similarly for the American public and consequently is going to print what is popular in the U.S.A., written by American authors and illustrated by American artists and naturally, if it happens to bring in a little sterling so much the better, but no change in policy.

British magazines in general, and NEBULA in particular are anxious to foster British talent in the writing and illustrating fields and their editors, being constantly in touch with the British reading public are anxious to print the kind of stories you enjoy reading: you see, they don't live over two thousand miles away.

Peter Hamilton